

BINNENLAND

Minister blijft wijzen naar Ter Apel als uitweg 'bed-bad-brood'

NOS Nieuws • Zaterdag 3 juni 2023, 17:39

PVV-leider Wilders: leger inzetten tegen asieloverlast Ter Apel

essale

Podc

Steeds meer buitenslapers in Ter Apel

29 februari 2024, 09:31 • 4 minuten leestijd



Twee jaar cel voor asielzoeker die medebewoner Ter Apel gijzelde, wordt niet uit het land gezet

NOS Nieuws • Donderdag 8 september 2022, 21:46 • Aangepast vrijdag 9 september 2022, 01:16

Honderden asielzoekers moeten buiten slapen in Ter Apel

Maandag 16 september, 20:57

COA: noodsituatie Ter Apel, kans dat mensen vannacht buiten moeten slapen

Uitwerking hoo

Schoof: 'Mensen ervaren een asielcrisis, daarom komen we met een noodwet'

Door RTL Nieuws • 13 september 2024 • Aangepast: 13 september 2024



Nachtenlang slapen op stoelen en op de grond, irritaties in Ter Apel nemen toe



Marco Grimmon

4 december 2023, 14:36 • 4 minuten leestijd



Schoof erkent dat het bij verzonnen asielcrisis niet gaat om feiten maar om 'gevoel'

Minister Faber komt met wetten voor 'strengste asielbeleid ooit', maar deskundige ziet: 'Gaat alleen om imago'

19-12-2024 06:30 | Politiek | Auteur: Jeff Pinkster, Remko Theulings



▲ Minister Margje Faber (Asiel en Migratie, PVV) bij haar eerste bezoek aan het aanmeldingscentrum in Ter Apel. © ANP/Vincent Jammink

Minister Faber schittert door afwezigheid in eigen 'asielcrisis': 'Ik ken geen burgemeester die door haar gebeld is'

Constructing the Crisis

Framing, Fear, and the Politics of Asylum in Ter Apel

“In a conflict or in a war, the truth is the first casualty (Respondent 2, personal communication, March 2025)”.

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Radboud Universiteit



Abstract

This study was conducted to gain insight into how the framing of asylum seekers in Ter Apel contributes to the legitimization of political decisions regarding the Dutch asylum system and the development of the registration centre in Ter Apel. A qualitative research design was employed, including interviews with experts and stakeholders involved with the centre, as well as a critical discourse analysis of media and news sources to uncover dominant narratives of politicians and media professionals. Visual materials, such as photographs, were also examined for their role in reinforcing particular frames.

The research shows that the overwhelming presence of negative framing, often linking asylum seekers to criminality and public nuisance, leads to the perception that the group as a whole can be characterized in this way. This facilitates an 'us versus them' mentality in which restrictive measures against this group become normalized, based not on individual behaviour but on structural and repetitive negative representations.

The findings also indicate that populist actors in Dutch politics exploit this dynamic for their own electorate by amplifying dominant frames and positioning themselves as saviours in the so-called asylum crisis. This framing justifies increased surveillance and securitization of a specific group in Ter Apel, reinforcing public fear and social distancing. As a result, asylum seekers are increasingly perceived not as individuals with potential to contribute to society, but as a threat that must be controlled. This contributes to a polarized society in which empathy, nuance, and recognition of individual agency are replaced by suspicion and exclusion.

Acknowledgements

Before you lies my master's thesis on the framing of asylum seekers in the Netherlands and the ways in which this framing contributes to political decision-making around asylum reception and the development of the registration centre in Ter Apel. This thesis marks the final component of the Master's program in Human Geography, with a specialization in *Conflicts, Territories, and Identities*. I look back on this program with a deep sense of gratitude and fulfilment.

I would like to take a moment to thank several people who have made this journey an incredibly enriching experience and who contributed to the realization of this final product.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Henk van Houtum, for our insightful conversations and your valuable support throughout this process. I always left our meetings feeling inspired by your perspective on the issues we discussed, and I truly felt supported during the entire writing journey. You stood by my side, and that had a profound impact on how I experienced this thesis project.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Maite Vermeulen for your guidance during my internship at *De Correspondent*. I learned so much from you—not only on a professional level, but also personally. Thank you for your thoughtful feedback, for taking me along to interviews, and especially for your kindness and enthusiasm. I will truly miss working with you.

Finally, I want to thank my dear friends and family. Your encouragement and belief in me allowed me to navigate this process with joy and perseverance. I feel incredibly fortunate to be surrounded by such a warm and supportive group of people, and I am especially grateful to the wonderful friends I met during this Master's program. Sharing this journey with you, including the many conversations about our research and the challenges we faced, has been invaluable.

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Abbreviations

AVIM – Aliens Police, Identification and Human Trafficking Department

AZC – Asylum Reception Centre

BBB – Farmer’s and people’s movement (Boer Burger Beweging)

COA – Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers

DT&V – Repatriation and Departure Service

IND – Immigration and Naturalization Service

PVV – Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid)

VVD – People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie)

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Before you, the reader, delve into this thesis, I would like to offer a brief explanation and justification regarding the use of artificial intelligence during the writing process. I made use of *Pinpoint*, an AI tool that assisted me in transcribing the interviews. In addition, I used *ChatGPT* as a source of inspiration and as a translation tool. When using ChatGPT for inspiration, it served solely to help stimulate my own thought process. I did not copy any text or ideas from ChatGPT, as doing so would violate academic plagiarism regulations.

A note on my positionality

To enhance the transparency of this research, I intend to be clear about my assumptions and beliefs as a researcher before and during this study. I am a white, 23-year-old woman who was born and raised in the Netherlands. My parents are still happily married, and our family has lived in the same house since 2003. The only time I had to move was when I decided to move into a student house, which I saw as a fun addition to my student experience.

My parents both have high-paying jobs, a shorter-than-usual workweek, and the ability to take a generous amount of vacation days. This ensured that we were always able to spend time together as a family, whether on vacation or on a regular Tuesday when other kids had to go to daycare. Our financial stability also allowed my sister and me to go to university, study abroad, and take low-paying internships when we felt they were beneficial for our careers. We were taught to work to provide for ourselves, but we were also made aware that money should never be something to worry about. As a result of my parents' saving habits, we are able to finish our studies debt-free, which is a very privileged position for my generation.

In addition to this, we were able to travel the world and experience cultures and places that are very different from our own. While traveling, we always had the safety of our home in the Netherlands waiting for us when we returned. We had the ability to book a flight to a destination we desired, where we felt safe, where we could gain new experiences, or which could take us back home—all because we have European passports, because we are Dutch citizens, and because we have the money to pay for it. These factors have always made it easy for me to go abroad, whether it is to travel or to study for an extended period.

I have a bachelor's degree in International Business Administration, and I am in the process of obtaining a master's degree in Human Geography with a specialization in Conflicts, Territories, and Identities. I have access to academic resources that other people might not have, which is a privilege. Since I am fully aware that I carry biases with me that I have accumulated throughout my academic development, and since the subject of this research is so heavily polarized and politicized, objectivity is an illusion. Therefore, in each academic step I take, I try to be as critical as possible, while remaining aware of my biases. In the field of conflict studies, I encounter topics and individuals who exist in a very different world from my own. However, while trying to understand these topics and individuals, I strive to be mindful of my privilege and seek to actively listen to those with different experiences from mine.

My political standpoints are progressive. I believe in equal opportunities for everyone, a welfare state where every individual is cared for equally, and significant investment in and care for the environment. These core beliefs include taking care of people in need, such as people who seek asylum, and treating those individuals with the attention and help they deserve. I do not agree with the current policy on asylum and migration in the Netherlands, which influences my view on the situation under investigation in this thesis. However, as a researcher, I will remain critical, transparent, and reflexive about the topics under investigation as well as my own standpoint on these topics. This attitude will ensure a critical and transparent approach, reinforcing the credibility of this research.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

On the morning of September 9th, 2022, Dutch newspapers were filled with reports about hundreds of people seeking asylum, sleeping outside on the grass field in front of the registration centre in Ter Apel. Due to the strain placed on the reception centre in Ter Apel, these people who seek asylum had to wait in long queues in anticipation of the start of their registration process at the AZC. Humanitarian organizations and local entrepreneurs distributed tents, which were later confiscated by law enforcement due to concerns about a fire hazard (NOS, 2022). This left people compelled to find their own makeshift shelter for the night, resulting in people sleeping under trucks or with no shelter at all (NOS, 2022a).

The pressure on the reception centre in Ter Apel cannot solely be viewed as a threat to the human rights of people who seek asylum; it is also frequently associated with incidents of public disturbance in the village. On June 18, 2024, such a disturbance escalated when a confused and aggressive individual allegedly attempted to steal from a HEMA store, according to the store owner (RTV Noord, 2025). The police intervened by firing a shot into the asylum seeker's upper leg, as the man appeared to be in a state of confusion and behaving aggressively. In addition to the HEMA store owner, the managers of the village's four major supermarkets have also reported recurrent disturbances involving people who seek asylum (De Boer, 2025). As a result, local shopkeepers have appealed to Minister Faber for financial compensation, citing substantial economic losses due to frequent shoplifting (De Boer, 2025). The reputational damage caused by these incidents has reportedly led to a decline in foot traffic from local residents, who now prefer to do their shopping elsewhere (De Boer, 2025). Unfortunately, these types of incidents happen more often, leading to negative news outlets about the centre in Ter Apel. The Netherlands is characterized by inadequate asylum policies, marked by persistent pressure on reception centres, the potential abolition of solutions such as the distribution law (Binnenlands Bestuur, 2024; Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2024), and the resulting negative impact on the people who seek asylum.

Migration is a phenomenon that is as old as mankind itself (McNeill, 1984). Over the past decade and as a consequence of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, migration of what was labelled as "non-western migrants" (Van Boxtel, 2023) increasingly became a political issue. Migrants were associated with terrorists under the assumption that non-Western cultures and ideologies, particularly Islam, were inherently violent and intent on destroying the West and could enter

any country at any time (Rowley, 2006). CNN, for instance, argued that “terrorists often operate as sleepers in a community, entering countries with the help of a network, many times with fake passports” (Bray, 2002). This development was also present in the Netherlands (Van der Burg et al., 2015). In 1989, the Party for the Freedom (PVV) organized a migration congress, where topics such as forced eviction of migrants were discussed (Visser, 2024). Attention for migration continued to increase in political debates, which got dominated by left-wing politicians as well as right-wing politicians at different points in time (Willemse & Ruigrok, 2017). Political figures such as Frits Bolkestein (*Frits Bolkestein | DNPP*, n.d.) and Pim Fortuyn (*Politiek Na Pim - Een Leeslijst - Universiteit Leiden*, n.d.) increasingly spoke out on the subject of migration, with the aim of strictly controlling asylum- and labour migration and restricting the freedoms and benefits of immigrants in the Netherlands.

The heavy politicization of migration of “non-western” (Van Boxtel, 2023) people resulted in the creation of policies aimed to further restrict migration towards the Netherlands, particularly asylum migration. Around the 1980s, municipalities were responsible for creating shelter for migrants, but when they could no longer manage the increasing number of migrants and faced financial difficulties, the government was called for help (Mattheijer, 2000). This led to the establishment of COA, which took on the responsibility of providing people who seek asylum with their basic needs - shelter and food. The mission of COA is defined as follows:

“The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) provides asylum seekers with safe and humane living conditions and supports them in their journey toward a future either in the Netherlands or elsewhere, in collaboration with partners across society” (Het COA, n.d.).

The Dutch government continued to develop policies that are set in place to control asylum migration. These policies have been put under the spotlight over the last few years. In 2023, the previous cabinet under the leadership of Mark Rutte from the VVD fell due to dissimilar opinions between the parties in the coalition regarding asylum migration (NOS, 2023). This resulted in the fall of the cabinet and new elections in the offing. These elections have been heavily dominated by the topic of asylum migration in political debates. Where leftist parties in the Netherlands were trying to tell the story that asylum migration is a moral and legal duty and that labour migration can help the development of our country (GroenLinks PvdA, 2024; Your Next Agency, 2024), right-wing parties were telling the story of how the Netherlands is experiencing an asylum migration crisis (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma 2022, 2022). The PVV

went so far as to insinuate that asylum migration was the mother of all problems in the Netherlands (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma 2022, 2022). According to them, the overwhelming number of migrants that are seeking refuge are taking our jobs, increasing criminality rates and reducing housing opportunities for ‘ordinary’ Dutch citizens (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma 2022, 2022).

There is one central topic that remains on the forefront of the debate; the COA location in Ter Apel. Initially established as a departure centre for people whose asylum application was rejected, the facility in Ter Apel emerged during a period of economic decline following the closure of the NATO depot and the MB board game factory (COA, n.d.-c). In response to rising concerns about unemployment, then-mayor Euverink engaged in active lobbying efforts in The Hague to generate new local employment, which ultimately culminated in the establishment of the centre (COA, n.d.-c). The decision to locate the departure centre in Ter Apel cannot be viewed in isolation from the fact that the village lies 250 kilometres from The Hague and is virtually inaccessible by public transport. This geographic remoteness contributes to the perception that those people whose asylum application got rejected and whom the Netherlands would prefer not to accommodate can simply be tucked away in a far-flung corner, thereby sustaining the illusion that the ‘problem’ itself ceases to exist.

In recent years, Ter Apel has been portrayed by the media as an overcrowded centre, overwhelmed by the large amounts of reception of people who seek asylum and insufficient capacity (Oving, 2024). The notion of “full” and “too many” is easily evoked when all people who wish to apply for asylum in the Netherlands must pass through a village of only 9,000 residents. If this centre were located in the heart of Amsterdam—where the urban landscape is more multicultural and local authorities are equipped to deal with metropolitan challenges—the resulting media representation would likely be very different. However, since the establishment of the a, the facility has frequently appeared in the media, with articles and images largely emphasizing the pressure on reception capacity and its negative consequences (EenVandaag, 2023; RTL Nieuws & Entertainment, 2024). Images of people who seek asylum sleeping outside the facility in Ter Apel became worldwide news, as they vividly portrayed the horrific conditions these individuals endured when unable to find a bed for the night. In addition, narratives are distributed about the spread of diseases as well as the social unrest that persists all supposedly caused by the people who seek asylum and who arrive in Ter Apel (EenVandaag, 2023). Next to this, the people seeking asylum in Ter Apel are inherently linked

to violence in the Dutch media, by broadcasting an increase in the number of violent outbursts in the area and pointing the finger at the people seeking asylum (Klungel, 2024; Sporrel, 2024). This went so far that Geert Wilders, the leader of the far-right PVV, advocated for deploying the military to address these so-called incidents (NOS, 2023a).

In order to make meaningful statements about public perceptions surrounding the registration centre in Ter Apel, it is essential to first develop a clear understanding of how the registration process functions. To this end, I examine the process as described by the Dutch central government (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2024) and the COA (*Ter Apel - Ter Apelervenen*, n.d.), as this provides insight into how the registration and asylum procedures are officially intended to operate. According to the Dutch central government (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2024) and the COA (*Ter Apel - Ter Apelervenen*, n.d.), when an asylum seeker arrives in the Netherlands, they are required to report to the application centre in Ter Apel. This marks the beginning of the asylum procedure, which proceeds as follows: the asylum seeker must register at the IND office located in Ter Apel, where AVIM is also situated. AVIM is responsible for registering the individual's personal details and collecting fingerprints. The asylum seeker then has an initial interview with the IND to determine their identity, country of origin, and travel route—all of which are relevant factors in deciding which procedural track the applicant will enter. This decision is made by the IND. As part of this assessment, the IND also checks whether the applicant has already been registered in another European country under the Dublin Regulation. In such cases, known as “Dublin claimants,” the asylum seeker is required to complete their asylum procedure in the country of first registration and is therefore returned to that respective state.

After registration and the initial interview, the asylum seeker enters the *rest and preparation period*, which lasts a minimum of six days. During this time, the asylum seeker is provided with accommodation by the COA. Following this phase, a second, more in-depth interview is conducted by the IND, in which the asylum seeker has the opportunity to present their full account. Based on this interview, the IND will issue a decision on the asylum application. This stage of the process may be extended if further investigation is deemed necessary. In principle, the IND must reach a decision within six months, although this period can be extended up to a maximum of 15 months in complex cases requiring additional inquiry.

There are also accelerated procedures in place for certain categories of applicants. These include Dublin claimants, individuals who have already been granted protection in another country, and applicants from countries designated as “safe countries of origin,” who are generally presumed not to require international protection.

If an asylum application is approved, the individual is granted a temporary residence permit valid for five years. At that point, the asylum seeker becomes a *status holder*, gaining access to housing, employment, social services, and a civic integration program. If, after five years, protection is still required and the individual has successfully completed the integration process, they may be granted a permanent residence permit. If the asylum application is rejected, the individual is expected to leave the Netherlands. In cases where the person does not depart voluntarily, the DT&V becomes involved to oversee and enforce the individual's return under supervision.

Ter Apel is the sole location in the Netherlands where people who seek asylum and who have successfully entered the country can register to begin the asylum procedure (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2024). The model featuring a single registration centre has not always been in place. In 2001, the registration centre in Ter Apel was opened, and when the remaining registration centres were closed due to a reduction in capacity following a decline in the number of people seeking asylum arriving in the Netherlands (Jeltien G. Kraaijeveld-Wouters, 2005), the centre in Ter Apel remained the only one in operation. However, the number of arrivals is subject to periodic fluctuations, influenced by various factors such as EU policies and geopolitical developments (Sunderland, 2023). As a result, the pressure on the registration centre is highly variable. During certain periods, the centre may experience lower volumes of arrivals, requiring fewer staff, while in other periods, a sudden increase in migration leads to overwhelming demand (D66, n.d.).

This dynamic necessitates a flexible system, one that can operate at varying speeds in response to the fluctuating number of people that are seeking asylum in the Netherlands. The current model, with only one registration centre for the entire country, often leads to bottlenecks (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2025). When the maximum capacity of 2,000 individuals staying at the centre in Ter Apel is at risk of being exceeded, additional emergency reception locations must be established to relieve pressure on Ter Apel (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2025). In short, this centralized system frequently results in logistical problems and widespread disruption.

The circumstances in Ter Apel served as the foundation for the campaign strategy of the PVV during the elections of 2023. A strategy that focuses on manufacturing a sense of crisis by combining images and words, leading people to perceive the situation as an actual crisis in need of solving. This crisis narrative is fuelled by media reports spreading negative framing against people that are seeking asylum in the Netherlands (Dagelijksestandaard.nl, 2024; Omroep Brabant, 2024; Savelberg, 2024), particularly in Ter Apel (EenVandaag, 2024; RTL Nieuws & Entertainment, 2024). Stories described overcrowded asylum centres (Hooiveld, 2024), migrants as criminals stealing prosperity of the ‘ordinary’ Dutch citizen, and threats to Dutch culture (Nws, 2023). The PVV positioned itself as the national messiah, promoting the slogan, “we are introducing the strictest asylum policy ever,” throughout debates and campaigns (NOS, 2024), a narrative that led to their major victory in the November 2023 elections.

There is a sufficient amount of research showing that this crisis narrative is based on feelings rather than facts (Adviesraad Migratie, 2025; Bremer, 2024; Raad van State, 2025). The Dutch prime minister himself even publicly admitted to this crisis not being a ‘real’ crisis, but a ‘perceived’ one (BNNVARA, 2024). Nevertheless, measures are suggested to help the country get out of this so-called crisis that is built on the chaos in Ter Apel. That raises the question: how did we reach this point? It is interesting and relevant to evaluate the steps that have been taken in order to shape the centre in Ter Apel as we know it today. How come it is located in a small rural village far from any large Dutch city? And how can a national crisis be so extremely localized in the small town of Ter Apel?

To try and answer these questions, this thesis will examine how Ter Apel plays such a pivotal role in the political campaigns of Dutch parties as well as the current political program of the elected government. Therefore, the research question that this thesis will try to answer is as follows;

"How is the framing of asylum seekers in relation to Ter Apel used to justify and shape asylum migration policy in the Netherlands, and what are its implications for the development of the centre?".

1.1 Societal relevance

This thesis critically examines the influence of frames on asylum reception in the Netherlands, specifically focused on the reception centre in Ter Apel, and how these frames influence and

legitimize migration policies in the Netherlands. Answering the research question of this thesis is societally relevant for five reasons. First, migration discussions often polarize society, as it divides a country into people who are pro and people who are against migration (Albada et al., 2021). Negative framing of Ter Apel and people who seek asylum in the Netherlands enhances this sense of polarization, by fostering mistrust and division. This affects not only the people who seek asylum, as a solution is harder to reach in a polarized society, but also Dutch society at large. Therefore, it is important to examine whether the narratives surrounding Ter Apel are fostering this division, and, if so, if there is potential for a more balanced discussion, potentially easing societal tensions.

Second, it is important to explore the role of media and political discourse in shaping asylum migration policy, to unravel the power dynamics between media, politics, and the public. In this research, I raise critical questions about the role of the actors in power, such as the media and political actors, in amplifying certain narratives and their potential consequences. This thesis thereby encourages greater transparency and accountability in how public opinion and policy are influenced.

Third, Ter Apel is the prime example of symbol politics in the Dutch asylum migration discussion. Symbol politics plays a crucial role in shaping how the public perceives complex issues like asylum migration. By reducing complex issues, such as the reception of asylum seekers in Ter Apel, to symbols with emotional meaning, such framing often oversimplifies debates. This manner of describing the situation influences public opinion and voter behaviour in ways that may not align with reality. Understanding this process is essential to fostering more nuanced discussions and informed decision-making in society. In addition, analysing the case of Ter Apel provides a framework to understand how symbolic politics might shape policies in other areas, which helps us understand how to handle such framing issues in more equitable ways.

Fourth, in an era where populism is becoming increasingly prominent in our society, it is important to examine the ways in which visual representation—whether active or passive—serves populist ideologies. My thesis contributes to that effort by presenting and analysing visual representations, thereby uncovering the connections between specific modes of representation and populist beliefs.

Last, the current framing of the reception of individuals seeking asylum in Ter Apel in Dutch media often perpetuates the sense of chaos. Portraying the situation as chaos or crisis creates the ability to justify restrictive and harsh measures against people who seek asylum and implement policies that could otherwise not be legitimized. This research can uncover how this framing contributes to instability rather than resolution, emphasizing the need for a more organized and constructive approach.

In sum, my thesis challenges policymakers, media professionals, and civil society actors to critically assess the narratives they circulate, thereby encouraging a more balanced and nuanced public dialogue on migration. Ultimately, my thesis contributes to ongoing debates on asylum migration governance in the Netherlands, offering insights that are applicable to similar dynamics in other contexts. It encourages Dutch society to reflect on its values and responsibilities in managing and discussing migration and asylum reception.

1.2 Scientific relevance

My thesis examines the interplay between media framing, political discourse and policy legitimization in an asylum migration context. I contribute to the existing knowledge base on the ways in which framing, populism, and the interplay between media and politics operate. It engages with the current academic debate on these themes and aims to broaden the understanding within this field. By focusing on a real-life situation in the Netherlands, I provide a localized yet relevant case study that highlights the interplay between media, political discourse and policy in a democracy. Therefore, my thesis carries scientific relevance for three reasons.

First, there is an extensive amount of research on the influence of media framing (Brouwer, van der Woude & van der Leun, 2017; D'Haenens and De Lange, 2001; Roggeband & Vliegenthart, 2007) and the influence of political discourse (Slothuus, 2010; Verleyen & Beckers, 2023) on policy creation. However, there remains the question of who influences whom? Is it the media that sets the agenda for political discussions, or does the media follow? While an extensive amount of literature has explored their effects separately, limited attention has been given to their complementary effects. I address the integration of these two domains, examining how media narratives and political discourse together influence the development

and implementation of asylum migration policies, highlighting their complementary relationship and mutual influence over time.

Second, this study adds specifically to the integration of media narratives and political discourse in a real-life example. I investigate the situation in Ter Apel, which provides an examination of how media framing and political discourse together can shape policy development and legitimation. Using Ter Apel as a case study enables me to not only provide general remarks on the influence of media framing and political discourse on policy development and legitimation but adds to that a specific angle in terms of contribution to the case in Ter Apel and Dutch policy development and legitimation. Next to this, it highlights the mechanisms through which localized situations, and their portrayal influence broader national policy-making development.

Third, this study adds to the body of knowledge on borders and asylum migration policy. Ter Apel functions as a constructed border through which migrants enter the Netherlands. While EU citizens may access the country via highways or through Schiphol Airport with ease, different rules apply to migrants. In this context, Ter Apel serves as a central site—an exemplary case—for examining both border policy and its framing. My thesis adds to the discourse by uncovering how border policy is framed, and the role Ter Apel plays within that framing.

In sum, this research provides scientific relevance by examining and contributing to the complementary relationship of media framing and political discourse in policy development and legitimation in the real-life context of Ter Apel. It adds to the already existing knowledge base on how framing, populism and media works and how these factors can be employed to influence outcomes in a real-life context. Last, it provides an example of how asylum migration- and border policies work and how they are framed.

1.3 Research objective and research question

The framing of asylum reception in the Netherlands, specifically in Ter Apel, portrays a picture of chaos and disorder. The asylum migration debate in the Netherlands has been captured by negative dominating frames, that vouch for a lower, if not no, increase in the applications of people seeking asylum (Visser, 2024) and this only got worse during the Dutch parliamentary

elections in 2023. Ter Apel has been the heart of this debate, as it is the picture of chaos and crisis among asylum reception in the Netherlands. The pictures of people that are seeking asylum and are sleeping outside, as well as the negative media attention the centre has received, contribute to the idea that more asylum migration will cause more chaos. The logic behind this idea is that if Ter Apel is unable to handle the number of people seeking asylum entering the Netherlands now, it can only get worse when we admit more people into other asylum reception centres. The “strictest asylum policy ever”, which is currently still awaiting implementation, does not focus on seeking solutions but rather on creating chaos to reinforce their political stance. The chaos unfolding in Ter Apel is a deliberate outcome, serving to justify the government's arguments. Their narrative hinges on chaos and crisis in the management of asylum reception. This has transformed Ter Apel from a village where people live, like any other, into a symbol of the issue. Ter Apel has become the centre of the migration debate.

This makes it essential to investigate how we arrived at this point. What political decisions were made? How was this portrayed in the media and discussed by other political actors? And how did the public perceive and respond to these developments?

My research objectives are as follows.

- To investigate how symbol politics work and how this is employed in Dutch asylum migration politics.
- To assess the effectiveness and impact of framing as a political tool to investigate how it is strategically employed to influence public opinion and policy.
- To determine how populists captured the debate around asylum migration in the Netherlands and how they employed their strategies to gain political legitimacy.
- To explore the framing of Ter Apel in Dutch media and politics to specifically address the narratives and rhetoric used by various actors.
- To investigate the impacts of such frames in Dutch society and policy by exploring how they shape perceptions, societal divisions, and governmental responses.
- To determine a timeline of policy decisions that were made by the Dutch government addressing Ter Apel as well as decisions that influenced the centre in Ter Apel.
- To assess how these policy decisions were justified in the context of the frames that were dominant in those specific points in time.

My research question is as follows; **"How is the framing of asylum seekers in relation to Ter Apel used to justify and shape asylum migration policy in the Netherlands, and what are its implications for the development of the centre?"**.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

This chapter discusses the relevant academic debate in multiple research arenas. First, I show the debate surrounding the idea as well as the act of framing, and I discuss how framing can be used as a political tool to influence the public. Then, I explore how political actors go about obtaining political legitimacy and what is necessary for them to achieve legitimacy. Next, I investigate the CNN-effect, which discusses the extent of the role of the media in framing processes. Then, I delve into the idea of symbol politics, uncovering the ways in which symbols are used by political actors. Finally, I move from these abstract concepts to the concrete case of migration, uncovering the dominant frames used to describe migration, with specific attention to the concept of othering.

In the following subchapters, I present the key and relevant concepts and outline the academic debate surrounding these concepts. I will also articulate my own position within this debate, which forms the basis for the theoretical lens through which I approach my research. At the end of this theoretical framework chapter, I will explain how the concepts are interconnected and how this framework will guide and support my analysis.

2.1 Framing

Framing has been researched extensively over a long period of time by many scholars. The work on framing by Entman (1993) might be one of the most appreciated and extensively used definitions on framing in the framing literature: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient" (p.52). Frames are thus a small depiction of reality that get more attention than others. Therefore, frames are not necessarily true or false, but an incomplete construction of reality (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Entman (1993) elaborates on the act of framing by identifying four key locations where frames appear in the communication process. First, the *communicator* makes framing choices, either deliberately or unintentionally, when presenting information. Second, the *text* itself contains

frames. These frames are embedded in the words, phrases, and stereotypes used in the content. Third, the *receiver* interprets the message. However, their interpretation may not always align with the original framing intended by the communicator. Finally, *culture* represents the collection of commonly accepted frames within a social group.

While Entman (1993) focuses on the way in which frames are communicated, Johnston (2013) elaborates on this by arguing how these frames are conveyed in the communicative process. He agrees with Entman (1993) that text is a powerful way to get frames across, both the explicit words and the implied or underlying meanings within a written document. However, he also acknowledges the importance of pragmatic intent, which relates to the purpose or goal that the text aims to achieve, explaining why it has been written in a particular way. In addition, Johnston (2013) argues that the social role of the communicator is vital as it reflects the status and influence that the role of the writer exerts on the produced text (Johnston, 2013).

One critique of the theories proposed by Entman (1993) and Johnston (2013) is that they primarily focus on framing techniques in textual content, thereby overlooking other means of framing. For this reason, I combine these theories with insights from Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy (2020b), Van Houtum (2024), Coleman (2010), Boeynaems et al. (2017), and Van Ostaijen & Scholten (2016). The importance of conducting framing studies is also relevant for maps (van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020b; Van Houtum, 2024), visuals (Coleman, 2010), metaphors (Boeynaems et al., 2017), and numbers (Van Ostaijen & Scholten, 2016). These factors are all able to portray an understanding or perspective on what is true by carefully selecting certain objects, words or numbers and making others salient.

2.2 The act of framing

The act of framing implies agency of a certain actor, to choose certain aspects to emphasize while others are concealed. Therefore, to frame is to exert power (Butler, 1997). However, this is only effective if the frames are successfully utilized and transmitted. Turner (1969) had a perspective on this, as he talked about the importance of defining a phenomenon as a problem or injustice which is in need of solving when creating effective frames. This can mobilize people to act on these injustices and change the circumstances (Snow, 2004). However, how real this problem is, is not relevant. It depends on the experience or perception of a phenomenon as a problem which entails that the public believes it to be a problem and can be mobilized to

act on it. In other words, as Coleman (2013) puts it; “agency is determined by perceived context” (p.329).

Entman (1993) and Turner (1969) have made significant contributions to the literature on framing and social movements, shaping the work of Benford and Snow (2000). Drawing on Entman’s (1993) definition and Turner’s (1969) idea of problem creation for mobilization purposes, Benford and Snow (2000) argued that frames serve to highlight and condense specific aspects of reality, thereby defining problems that require solutions and mobilizing supporters to address them. They build on this by stating that frames decide how individuals give meaning to events and therefore shape experiences in such a way that it guides action (Benford & Snow, 2000).

2.3 Media framing and political discourse

Identifying and highlighting certain aspects of an issue and making them more important than others is a routine that the media fulfills on a daily basis (Greenwood & Thomson, 2019). Chong and Druckman (2007) explore the effects of frames in communication, specifically the frames that elites communicate to influence the public’s view on reality. This process is defined as a “framing effect” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p.7). As per the definition of Entman (1993), framing can be seen as the exertion of power, which, in the context of Chong and Druckman (2007), can be used by actors, such as politicians, media outlets and information organizations, to bring their message to a media platform. The media has a massive contribution to people’s construction of reality, since their representation of events can influence public perception (Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). Since politicians have such a wide media representation, they are able to use framing as a tool “to define problems, identify causes and remedies, and/or deliver a moral judgment on these problems” (Verleyen and Beckers, 2023, p. 729). In addition, the framing of certain issues by elites not only influences the public’s perception of these issues, but also shapes their policy preferences (Slothuus, 2010).

Media framing works in two ways, through selection and representation. Selection, meaning the choice of what becomes newsworthy, and representation, meaning the way in which these newsworthy items are portrayed (Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007). The underlying mechanisms of this framing process overlap with those of agenda-setting theory, which states that, by regularly presenting certain topics, the media has power over what people think and

how they think it, thereby creating the public debate (Brouwer et al., 2017). D’Haenens and De Lange (2001) argued that through agenda setting practices, the media is not only able to influence what people think about subjects, but can even mobilize people to act on these beliefs. Therefore, the transmission of certain frames in the media exerts a significant influence on the way we think and act.

However, for a substantial amount of time, there has been a debate about agenda-setting theory, in the sense that the question continues to arise of who influences whom. It remains unclear whether the media sets the agenda in the political sphere, or whether the media merely follows politics (Vliegthart & Roggeband, 2007). I will come back to this discussion in a later subchapter. What can be said for certain is that the media and the political sphere are intertwined when it comes to framing (Vliegthart & Roggeband, 2007). As Dekker and Scholten (2017) explain, the effects of media framing on the political agenda setting are more influential when the media agrees with the political actor’s frame.

The consequences of the arguments presented above are profound. People’s construction of reality is highly influenced by media portrayals of phenomena (Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). Politicians can use this in their favour, by using their privilege of having a wide media portrayal. Here, they can transmit their preferred frames onto populations, resulting in the creation of the public debate (Brouwer et al., 2017; Roggeband and Vliegthart, 2007). In addition, if existing media frames are consistent with the frames that politicians are using to make certain aspects of a phenomena more salient, the framing effect doubles (Dekker & Scholten, 2017) and the way in which populations think about said phenomena is influenced even more. Wehling (2017), in her chapter on framing in politics, builds on this as she argues that individuals’ political stances are no longer driven by facts, but by the frames that assign meaning to their understanding of reality. As a result, she argues, frames facilitate the ability of two people to come to opposite conclusions about what is right or wrong policy making based on the same statistics, which leads the way for morally contested political issues (Wehling, 2017). This means that individuals no longer vote based on facts but based on the ability of politicians and the media to evoke feelings about what is right and wrong through the frames they propagate.

In this process, a crucial step is still missing. Much has been said about how political elites are able to influence the public through framing; however, this influence is only effective when the

frame is perceived by the audience as credible and legitimate (Johnston, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to take the analysis one step further and examine the academic debate on how politicians acquire legitimacy for their policies.

2.4 Policy legitimation

Political legitimacy is essentially about the question of when it is morally legitimate that a particular political entity exercises political power (Buchanan, 2002). To understand the factors of policy legitimacy, it is critical to understand how legitimacy is created and maintained. Andeweg and Aarts (2017) note that political legitimacy is often operationalized as political support, such as satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions. Even though these two are not the same, political legitimacy is an important source of political support (Andeweg & Aarts, 2017).

As Ansell (2001) showed, legitimacy is a bilateral process, since the public needs to believe in the goodness of policy ideas and the government needs to claim this goodness through their position of power. Goddard and Krebs (2015) agree and argue that actions can only be legitimate if actors claim them to be and if the audience believes them. Therefore, the key to securing legitimacy as a political actor is to be able to convince the public of the legitimacy of the proposed policy. Here, the role of framing plays an essential part, as it grants a political actor the ability to structure complex issues in a more comprehensible way and portray reality in a way that fits their interests (Benford & Snow, 2000). In this sense, framing reciprocates power structures, as political elites can take control over the political debate by framing political issues in a manner that suits their pursuit for legitimacy (Daviter, 2007). Therefore, in order to gain and maintain legitimacy, political actors can frame their policies in ways that appear legitimate and resonate with public values.

2.5 The CNN-effect

However, framing does not occur in a vacuum. The media plays a crucial role in either amplifying or challenging these frames, raising the question of who truly drives public discourse—the media or political elites? There is an ongoing debate in academic literature that discusses how big the influence and power of the media is (Robinson, 2001). The essence of this debate lies in the question if the media is an independent source that can determine and

direct national policy, the so-called CNN effect, or if the media is nothing other than an instrument to manufacture the elite's consensus and support their arguments?

According to Robinson (1999), the 'CNN effect' encapsulated the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events (p. 301). Although the CNN effect in theoretical research is mostly applied to foreign policy, where real-time coverage of humanitarian crises showing people in need on Western television could influence foreign aid policy (Bennet, 1994), the general question whether the media directs or follows remains relevant in this research.

On one side of the debate, there is this notion that the media can exert significant influence on policymakers, compelling them to take actions, such as a stricter asylum policy (Robinson, 2001). This perspective emphasizes the media's potential to mobilize public opinion and pressure political elites. Cohen (1994) argues that the media possesses enormous amounts of power over governments, as they can "move and shake" (p.9) government policy. In addition, Bennet (1994) argues for the power of media over government policy, especially vivid portrayals of grass-root actors showcasing inequality, conflict or war on live television. As an example, Bennet (1994) talks about images of starvation in Somalia in 1992, which got broadcasted on live television and mobilized an international humanitarian intervention. In this sense, the media can determine what is important, what should be broadcasted and thus, in turn, pressures political elites to act upon this. In addition, Curran (2012) in his book on media and power, describes how suppliers of news played a key role in public values and beliefs. The media can dictate the interpretation of an event in the way in which they broadcasted said event, and this subsequently determines the terms of reference in which the debate continues (Curran, 2012).

On the other side of the debate, the idea of manufacturing consent is central to their reasoning (Robinson, 2001). It argues that the media primarily operates within the frameworks of elite's interests and government policies in a way that the media supports their policies and mobilizes the public to align their opinions with the objectives of those in power (Herman & Chomsky, 2021). For example, Van Dijk (1995) argues that the media is not the initiative taker but rather a follower of the arguments of political elites. According to him, the media rarely determines the popular discourse, but it works as an instrument to legitimize political arguments of the dominant elites and it thereby reinforces existing power relations (Van Dijk, 1995).

Somewhere in the middle lies the research of Robinson (2011). After researching the CNN effect for various years, Robinson (2011) revisited this theory and noted various nuances that somewhat bring these two sides of the debate closer to a consensus. He argues that the influence of the media is not a constant factor, but it depends on two factors. First, the amount of policy uncertainty, or as he describes it, the division of political elites on a particular issue renders the media space to respond to this division and potentially influence government policy (Robinson, 2011). Conversely, when there exists a strong consensus among political elites on a particular topic, the media can only support this and align the public opinion with this consensus, which is in line with the manufacturing consent stream of the debate (Robinson, 2011).

Secondly, Robinson (2011) argues that the influence of the media is dependent on the frames they portray. The way in which a story is presented can have a substantial effect on public perception and the pressure on policy makers (Robinson, 2011).

I position myself in this debate in line with Robinson (2011). I regard the media as a highly powerful actor, as it can influence what people see and how information is conveyed. At the same time, I also believe that the media follow political developments and report on them. The media's power lies precisely in this reporting, as it can portray political events through specific frames that can emphasize or downplay certain aspects of reality.

2.6 Symbol politics

Symbols play a prominent role in politics as they give meaning, express power relations and can mobilize the people (Gill & Angosto-Ferrandez, 2018). In essence, a symbol is something that represents something else, often a complex concept, which requires human interpretation to be meaningful (Helsloot, 2017). Symbols therefore help people understand and interpret complex issues. Helsloot (2017) argues that symbolic action and symbol politics always aims to influence how individuals perceive reality, and it is therefore crucial that they appear rational and align with the audience. The practical effect, however, is always very limited in symbol politics, as the focus lies on influencing one's perception of reality instead of practically changing it (Helsloot, 2017).

Gill and Angosto-Ferrandez (2018) argue that symbols are multivocal, which means that different individuals or groups can interpret the same symbol in a different manner. For

example, an oppressed population may perceive the flag of the oppressor as a symbol of oppression, while the oppressor may regard it as a symbol of victory. This results in a constant battle to decide on the dominant meaning of the symbol, where the prevailing party can use their ability to make their meaning of the symbol dominant as an advantage in political conflicts (Gill & Angosto-Ferrandez, 2018).

Zald (1966) examined the relationship between political symbols and the functioning of the state and social systems. The central argument of his text is that symbols in politics serve to evoke a sense of solidarity and affirm the authority and power of the state. His work is influenced by the arguments of Edelman (1985), where he argues that symbols are used for social interaction and the creation of cohesion within society. Symbols and symbolic actions can cause people to passively accept political conditions, but the outcome of these types of symbolic actions is heavily influenced by the relationship between the actor (a political leader) and the audience (the public) (Edelman, 1985). Symbols are therefore primarily tools used by political actors to influence public perception (Edelman, 1985; Helsloot, 2017) and maintain political order (Edelman, 1985).

Dittmer (1977) argued that not only are symbols able to affirm the authority and power of the state, but power holders and elites are able to manipulate symbols to protect and legitimate their power. This argument leads us to the next sub-theme in the theoretical framework; populism.

2.7 Symbol politics and populism

Research shows a significant and versatile connection between symbol politics and populism (Gill & Angosto-Ferrandez, 2018; Moffit, 2022; Molnár, 2021; Taranu, 2015). Populists intensively use symbols to communicate their message, mobilize support and identify and influence the political arena (Taranu, 2015). The academic debate on the connection between populism and symbolic politics highlights various factors and arguments. I position myself within this debate by describing the relationship in the following five ways, which together constitute the analytical lens for my analysis in the next chapter. First, populists often engage in a struggle for legitimacy (Taranu, 2015). This struggle is not conducted through debates over concrete policy proposals, but rather through processes of representation and the strategic portrayal of situations in ways that generate legitimacy for their position (Taranu, 2015). In this

dynamic, symbols are crucial in shaping a collective identity of “the people”, who are central in the populist ideology (Gill & Angosto-Ferrandez, 2018).

Secondly, populist methods often entail creating a unified “people” who are separate from the political “elites” (Taranu, 2015). A key feature of populist strategy is the construction of “the people” as a unified, homogeneous entity, in contrast to “the political elite” as the other (Taranu, 2015). This binary framing simplifies the political space into a clear dichotomy of ‘us versus them.’ Within this framework, ‘we’ represent the people—a morally pure and cohesive collective—set against ‘them,’ the political elite, who are portrayed as corrupt and as enemies of the people (Taranu, 2015). Geert Wilders used this technique a lot during his campaign for the 2023 elections in the Netherlands, where he continuously stated that “The Netherlands must once again belong to the Dutch” (Tweede Kamerfractie Partij Voor De Vrijheid, n.d.). With this statement, he blamed the previous government for its lenient approach to migration policy, which, in his view, had resulted in the country being overrun with foreigners—individuals he claimed do not belong and who, according to him, pose a threat to the Dutch state and culture (PVVpers, 2023). The separation of two entities - us versus them - is executed by using symbols, which help to clearly visualize the division between the two groups (Moffitt, 2022).

Third, and building on the argument above, populists use this division to mobilize “the people” against “the elites” (Taranu, 2015). They achieve this primarily by employing negative myths and political symbols to garner support for their own ideas (Taranu, 2015). By focusing on a common enemy of “the people”—as the PVV does with migrants, though this tactic is often directed at minorities or small elite groups—populists mobilize the majority against a minority that is framed as the enemy (Taranu, 2015). Symbols are used in this sense by evoking grievances and strengthening a sense of belonging to the unified group (Dittmer, 1977).

Fourth, nationalism and Euroscepticism is a big part of the populist ideology and are therefore important symbols of contemporary populism (Taranu, 2015). Populists are often nationalists, aiming to improve the conditions in their home country and putting “their people” first. This is evident in the campaign of the PVV, as they continuously argue that the EU is nothing but a money pit, and that The Netherlands should stop spending money on the development of other countries when its “own people” are having trouble buying groceries (PVVpers, 2023). In addition, and more specifically, the PVV is explicit in its stance on the allocation of housing to migrants who have been granted residency status. According to the party, it is unacceptable

that an individual who is seeking asylum—who, in their view, has cost the Dutch state significantly too much money—should receive a home while the hard-working Dutch citizen is passed over in the queue (PVVpers, 2023). This mode of argumentation, rooted in nationalist ideology, aligns closely with populist logic.

Last, the message of the PVV is further reinforced through the visual use of nationalist symbols, such as the colours of the Dutch flag, which are prominently displayed on the PVV's website and across all campaign materials (Moffitt, 2022). By using visual symbols, the leader can strengthen its connection with “the people”, as these images contribute to the normalization of the leader, presenting them as one of the people (Moffitt, 2022). In addition, visual symbols carry underlying meaning (Molnár, 2021), such as the colours of the Dutch flag carry the meaning of nationalism which, in the political arena of the PVV, means putting the Dutch people first and implies a strict migration policy. When these symbols are normalized and routinely used, their underlying meaning also gets normalized, which is how symbols can facilitate the normalization of radical political ideas (Molnár, 2021).

2.8 Framing of migrants

In these last paragraphs, I go from the abstract ideas of framing, political legitimacy, symbol politics and populism back to the concrete arena of migration where all these factors play a role. This next paragraph shows how migrants are framed by the media and how there are four dominant frames recurring in every debate, news outlet or other form of media output that talks about migration.

There are many ways in which people seeking asylum are framed in the media, and the academic debate on dominant frames therefore encompasses various perspectives and arguments. Some scholars argue that asylum seekers are primarily depicted as a threat to safety (Horsti, 2016; Roggeband & Vliegenthart, 2007) or the culture of the host country, as intruders, or as a burden on the host country's economy (Amores & Arcila, 2019; Brouwer et al., 2017; Horsti, 2013; Ter Horst, 2024; Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). Humanitarian frames also emerge, portraying people seeking asylum as victims (Greenwood & Thomson, 2019; Horsti, 2016; Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). In addition, academic research highlights that asylum seekers are sometimes framed as an opportunity for the host country, contributing positively to economic development (Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). Beyond these frames, some scholars contend that national identity frames frequently appear in media coverage, positioning asylum seekers in

the 'they' category and the local population of the host country in the 'we' category (Austin & Fozdar, 2018). Such framing is often used for purposes of inclusion or exclusion or are employed to appeal to national values such as respect for human rights and generosity (Austin & Fozdar, 2018). Austin & Fozdar (2018) also identified global or cosmopolitan identity frames, which advocate for humanitarian protection and human rights worldwide, irrespective of national borders.

From this academic debate, I identify four frames that are relevant for this research and that constitute the analytical lens through which I conduct my analysis. I have chosen these four frames because, in my view, they are the most comprehensive and serve as broader categories under which less frequently used frames can be subsumed. The first two are mostly de-humanizing as they primarily show migration as something negative, whereas the last two are more positive towards migration.

The first frame poses migrants as threats. In particular to safety, the host culture or to society (Horsti, 2016). This frame was mostly dominant after 9/11, when Islam was increasingly being seen as a threat to Western society, specifically being portrayed as terrorists (Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007). In the Netherlands specifically, this increased after the murder of Dutch anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn and the murder of Theo van Gogh by a radicalized Muslim (Bos et al., 2016). This threat frame focuses on multiple threat levels. First, migrants are often associated with criminality, which gets linked to the word 'illegal' (Brouwer et al., 2017). It implies that an undocumented migrant is in violation of the law and, therefore, inherently criminal and a threat to public safety. However, the term "illegal" is not applicable to the migrant as a person but rather to the way they have entered or reside in the country. A person can never be illegal; rather, it is their residency or the route taken to the host country that may be deemed unlawful (Brouwer et al., 2017). Images of huge, threatening arrows on a map, unidirectionally travelling to the EU (Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020b; Van Houtum, 2024) or boats on their way across the Mediterranean Sea evoke the sense of an invasion, and pictures of migrants taken from the back - due to privacy reasons - remove the human aspect and amplify the perception of an unknown threat (Brouwer et al., 2017). Second, migrants are posed as threats to the host culture, where ideas such as the impossibility for migrants to integrate are at the forefront of the frame (Van Gorp et al., 2020). According to this frame, different cultures will inevitably clash, necessitating the preservation of Dutch culture at all costs (Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007; Van Dijk, 1995). In this context, there is minimal

room for adaptation to non-Dutch cultures. Migrants arriving in the Netherlands are expected to conform to Dutch customs. According to those who adopt this perspective, the likelihood of successful integration is exceedingly low, if not impossible.

The second frame poses migrants as societal and economic burdens on the host country (Amores & Arcila, 2019). Economically, the focus is mostly on the high costs of asylum reception in contrast to the contribution of a participant of society, which migrants are unable to become due to legal restrictive measures (Ter Horst, 2024). Societally, the focus is on the strain that migrants supposedly put on the welfare state, as migrants can use all sorts of facilities but never contribute to Dutch society. This frame is evident when looking at the Dutch housing markets, where migrants were able to obtain social housing supposedly more easily than Dutch citizens (Metro, 2025). Ter Horst (2024) makes a clear distinction between Ukrainian migrants and Syrian migrants in this frame, as his research showed that Syrian people that seek asylum are negatively associated with the burden on society, while Ukrainian people that seek asylum are praised for the contributive efforts on the labor market.

Third, migrants as victims is a dominant frame in Western media, depicting the migrant as a person suffering from war, violence, human trafficking or poverty (Horsti, 2016). An important amplification in this frame is that the circumstances in which migrants find themselves are out of their control (Greenwood & Thomson, 2019).

Last, the normalization frame sees migrants as human beings and depicts them as such, by focusing on individual stories of resilience (Ter Horst, 2024). The focus here is often on the ways in which migrants can contribute to society and stories where integration was successful to the point where the host country benefits from the presence of the migrant.

Looking at these four dominant frames, we can see that these frames are mostly linked to religion, culture, ethnicity or geographical location of migrants. These factors determine the extent to which the host culture or the public perceives similarities with the group in question, which in turn shapes how the group is viewed and discussed (Buchowski, 2020). These four factors are thus very important in deciding why and how migrants are framed in Western media. However, it is important to note that these four dominant frames are not set in stone over time. According to Gamson et al. (1992), a frame is a process of constructing meaning and can therefore not be seen as something static, rather it should be seen as something transformative

and always in motion. There are three factors that contribute to the transformations of frames. First, the influence of specific historical activities can transform dominant frames (Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007). The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh led to a more dominant framing where the Islam was seen as a direct threat to the safety of the Western world and the Netherlands in specific. Next to this, the war in Ukraine led to a more welcoming attitude towards migrants and frames that focused on the benefits these individuals could bring to society. Secondly, shifts in political constellations, such as the formation of a new coalition, can alter the political agenda and influence dominant frames (Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007). Last, long-term shifts in world politics can alter the dominant frames, by creating a new status-quo that makes existing interpretations of reality and its interpretations of problems redundant or wants to redefine them (Huysmans & Squire, 2009). An example of this is the fall of the iron curtain and the collapse of the Soviet Union (Huysmans & Squire, 2009).

2.9 Othering

Overarching the ways in which migrants are framed in the media lies a broader and highly relevant theme: the construction of a "us versus them" narrative, also known as *othering* (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). This serves as a strategic political tool through which politicians seek to emphasize a clear distinction between two groups (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). In this case; the rightful inhabitants of a country and the migrants who seek entry—whether in pursuit of a better future or as a means of escaping war or persecution. *Othering* reinforces the perception of these two groups as inherently separate: passport holders versus those without, individuals free to travel within the EU versus those restricted from doing so, and members of a so-called superior culture versus those who are excluded from it (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). There are numerous factors that are important to note when I talk about *othering*.

First, the very concept of Europe is fundamentally built upon the idea of a European "us" versus a non-European "them," wherein it has been necessary to emphasize and maintain this distinction through borders and policies designed to prevent "them" from joining "us" (Paré, 2022). In the contemporary world, the migrant is the exact depiction of what the EU thinks of as "them" (Paré, 2022). Through processes of *othering*, migrants are constructed as different from the dominant European group, which often followed racial and ethnic narratives (Thomas-

Olalde & Velho, 2011). This racial component of *othering* also holds within groups of migrants, as western - and often white - migrants are more often welcomed, whereas “non-western” (Van Boxtel, 2023) migrants are portrayed as criminal, dangerous and a threat (Paré, 2022). The securitization of migrants is effective through the creation of fear and distrust towards individuals who do not belong in the “in-group” (Paré, 2022).

Second, the construction of EU borders, or as Van Houtum and Van Naerssen (2002) call it, the bordering process, is closely linked to othering processes. Borders do not only create a physical division between two places; they also define who is considered to belong and who is not (Geisen et al., 2007; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002). This helps to justify border policies that prevent “them” from crossing the border and becoming part of “us”. In doing so, the European Union uses policy to decide who receives protection and who does not (Geisen et al., 2007; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002), giving more value to some migrants than to others (Paré, 2022).

2.10 Bordering

So far, I have not yet addressed the role of borders, even though this concept lies at the very heart of Ter Apel. Ter Apel is a prime example of Dutch border policy—or more precisely, Ter Apel is the border of the Netherlands. However, this does not apply equally to everyone. As EU citizens, we cross the border via the highway or arrive at Schiphol Airport with little to no hindrance. For those without a European passport, however, different rules apply. In this paragraph, I will explore how Ter Apel has been constructed as a border to separate those without EU passports—'them'—from 'us' in three distinct ways as described by Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020a).

The first border Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020a) identify is the paper border. This is the invisible step in the bordering process, where, based on visas and other official documents, decisions are made—often from offices far removed from the physical border—about who is allowed to cross legally (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). This form of mobility control legitimizes a system of discrimination based on nationality (Bueno Lacy & Van Houtum, 2024). In essence, it raises the question of whether one is permitted to cross a border solely based on their place of birth (Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021)—a factor entirely beyond one’s control and impossible to change. This reflects a global inequality in which Europe—or, in the

context of this thesis, the Netherlands—is positioned as the in-group, seeking to invisibly, yet effectively, keep the out-group at bay through administrative processes regulated from a distance (Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021). This is what Van Houtum (2021) calls borderism; “the discriminatory, nativistic politics of b/ordering and othering” (p.36).

Secondly, there is the iron border (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). This consists of fences, walls, barbed wire, and military surveillance systems such as cameras (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). In contrast to the paper border, this form of bordering is highly visible. Its purpose is twofold: to provide the in-group with a sense of security through physical deterrence, and to intimidate the out-group, discouraging or preventing them from attempting to cross (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). The iron border is often employed as a symbol of strict asylum policy. It visibly demonstrates the political willingness to keep migrants out through highly tangible and physical means (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). Fences, after all, symbolize the desire to exclude what is deemed not to belong inside. In this way, the iron border functions primarily as a tool for electoral appeal, signaling toughness on migration to potential voters (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a).

Finally, the asylum camps, such as Ter Apel, function as the final barrier between the migrant and the society of the country in which they seek refuge (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). In the case of Ter Apel, as with many similar camps across Europe that accommodate people who seek asylum who have dared to cross the border and succeeded, such sites are often located in remote, peripheral areas, deliberately removed from public view (Bueno Lacy & Van Houtum, 2024). Ter Apel clearly illustrates the societal division between rightful and non-rightful residents within the Netherlands. The migrants in Ter Apel are physically present yet are not granted citizenship rights. They are not fully recognized as legitimate human citizens within the bureaucratic framework until they can credibly prove their right to remain— all of course according to the standards set by the Dutch institutions governing migration policy. In this way, asylum camps divide society along lines of class and race (Bueno Lacy & Van Houtum, 2024).

Europe’s border policy extends far beyond physical boundary lines (Van Houtum, 2021). The selection process determining who is allowed to enter the EU, based on the possession of a visa, a mere piece of paper, already constitutes the first ‘border’ between the EU and the rest of the world (Van Houtum, 2021). When individuals are unable to obtain a visa due to holding

a passport from a country to which the EU does not grant visas, again, a piece of paper, they may still attempt to enter without one. In that case, they encounter another form of border, one that is not defined by the EU's physical boundary, but by the refugee camp (Van Houtum, 2021). Even once someone is physically present on European territory, they are still subjected to border policies that continue the selection process, determining who is granted entry and who is not.

It is the three types of borders discussed above that exert far greater impact than the visible line on the map separating the Netherlands from Belgium and Germany. These three forms of bordering are deeply embedded in the social, political, and cultural dimensions of Dutch border policy, contributing to the normalization of discrimination (Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021), the creation of spaces of exception (Van Houtum, 2021), and the selective application—or suspension—of human rights (Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2021). Such policies divide the world along lines of class and race, a reality made especially visible in Ter Apel. It is therefore essential to critically examine who constructs borders, for whom these borders exist, and to understand the complex relationships between the 'borderers' and the 'bordered' (Cooper, 2015).

In this study, the theoretical concepts of framing, media discourse, political discourse, populism, symbolic politics, the framing of migrants, bordering, and othering are interconnected through their shared focus on meaning-making related to asylum migration within the Dutch policy context. Framing theory, and its application to asylum migration, provides me with tools to analyse how media and political actors discuss asylum migration in the Netherlands and in Ter Apel, and how this influences public perceptions. The concepts of populism and symbolic politics help me understand how rhetorical strategies are employed to shape public opinion on issues such as asylum migration and Ter Apel, and how policy decisions can serve as symbols representing either action or inaction on asylum migration and efforts to alleviate pressure on Ter Apel. The concepts of bordering and othering enable me to delve deeper into the subject matter, adopting a broader perspective on what European asylum migration means for the inclusion and exclusion of asylum migrants, and how border policies contribute to shaping a 'us-versus-them' narrative in public perception. By combining these concepts in this thesis, they form the theoretical lens through which I conduct my analysis and address my research question. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on how I will apply these concepts in my analysis and outline the steps for conducting the analysis itself.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

My thesis traces the transformation of Ter Apel from a small and tranquil village in Groningen to a central site of media attention, public incidents, and political debate. Over time, Ter Apel has come to symbolize the broader challenges and tensions surrounding the Dutch asylum system. To understand this transformation, the study adopts an exploratory and inductive research design, moving from empirical observations to broader conceptual insights (Moss, 1979).

An inductive approach is particularly suited to this research, as it allows for methodological flexibility (Liu, 2016), enabling the research strategy to evolve in response to new findings and shifting analytical needs. This flexibility is essential for capturing the complex and dynamic nature of media framing and asylum policy discourse. A qualitative methodology underpins the study, as it allows for a deep engagement with the contextual specificities of the case.

Throughout the research process, different methodological tools are employed where appropriate, with triangulation serving as a guiding principle to enhance the validity and depth of the analysis. This chapter outlines the rationale behind these methodological choices and explains how data were collected and analysed to answer the central research question. Rather than seeking to confirm a predefined theory, the aim is to explore and interpret the phenomenon of Ter Apel in its broader socio-political context.

As stated above, the research question for this study is as follows; ***"How is the framing of asylum seekers in relation to Ter Apel used to justify and shape asylum migration policy in the Netherlands, and what are its implications for the development of the centre?"***.

The three main concepts of this study are 'media framing', 'political discourse', and 'policy development and legitimation'. The objective of this study is to assess how media framing and political discourse have influenced the policy development and justification of Dutch migration policies.

For this framework, I understand the concept of framing as selecting and placing emphasis on a chosen problem definition to make it more salient (Entman, 1993). It negotiates a shared understanding of the problem in need of change, assigns responsibility to a weak link, proposes

a different course of action and encourages collective efforts to drive this change (Benford and Snow, 2000). Thus, frames are a portrayal of the use of power in creating narratives, which can be done through speech, text, numbers, maps, visuals and metaphors (Boeynaems et al., 2017; Coleman, 2010; van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020b; Van Ostaijen & Scholten, 2016). I do not place focus on a specific platform. Instead, attention is directed toward forms of framing where relevant.

Next, political discourse in this framework is considered to be statements, speeches and declarations, online as well as in-person, produced and carried out by a political actor (Van Dijk, 1997) to carry out a political action (Randour et al., 2020).

Furthermore, policy legitimation is understood as a process where “legitimacy is created and maintained, or eroded and lost” (Ansell, 2001, p.8706). Legitimacy, in this nature, has a two-sided meaning, where on the one hand legitimacy is present through beliefs in the goodness of certain policies, which comes from the people, whereas on the other hand it is created through claims about the rightness of the policy by the person or persons in charge (Ansell, 2001).

To measure the concept of framing, it is important to note the following. Frames are only useful and successful when they can penetrate the mental black box to be able to determine the problem definition and course of action for change (Johnston, 2013). Frame analysis is therefore about cognitive processes (Johnston, 2013). Since the scope of this study is not wide enough to research brain stimulants, I will focus on the organization of concepts and experiences that indicate how a situation is interpreted (Johnston, 2013). I looked at three key components to understand how the media selects, organizes, and presents information, which influences public perception and policy discourse. First, I analysed the framing techniques used in media coverage of Ter Apel. Here, there are several key points that were taken into account while analysing media output. The first is retrieved from the framing analysis methodology presented by Johnston (2013), which is ‘text as a holistic construct’. In this context, ‘text as a holistic construct’ means the words as well as implications and underlying meanings in a written document. I added to this method all numbers, maps, images and metaphors used by media or political actors as literature shows these factors contribute to the framing effect as well (Boeynaems et al., 2017; Coleman, 2010; van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020b; Van Houtum, 2024; Van Ostaijen & Scholten, 2016).

The second component is the agenda setting practices, to understand how media prioritizes issues, potentially shaping public and political focus on migration. According to Moy, Tewksbury and Rinke (2016) “agenda-setting refers to the ability of the mass media to signal

to the public what is important” (p.2). By holding power over the intensity of media coverage on certain subjects, the media can shape the public perceptions on the importance of those subjects (Moy et al., 2016). This makes it an important dimension to account for when better understanding the framing of Ter Apel.

The third and last component is the priming effect which is the effect that the media has on the public perception of border and asylum migration policies (Antoniou, 2024). This is an important dimension, as the effect tells something about the success or failure of a framing effort.

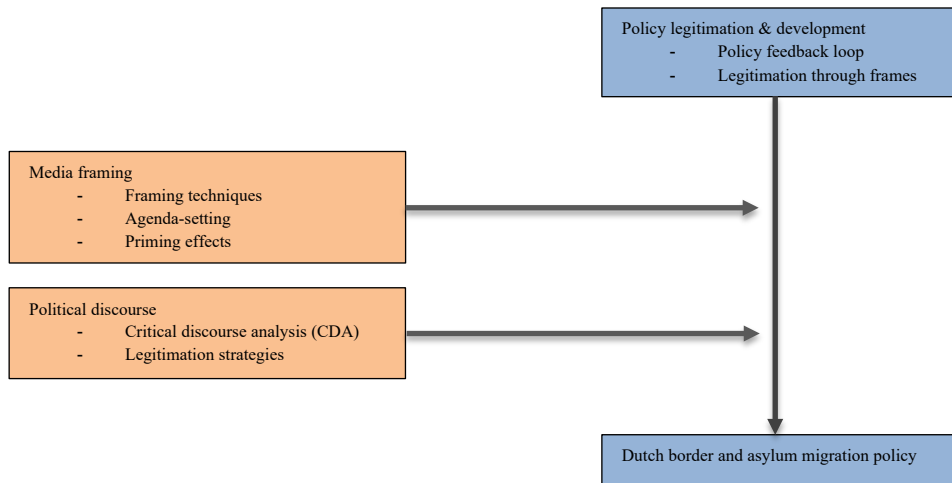
There are two relevant components that help us better understand political discourse. First, critical discourse analysis helps us to investigate how political speeches, debates, and policy statements construct narratives around migration and Ter Apel (Fairclough, 2013). It entails “a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements” (p.9) such as power relations between actors, ideologies, identities, etcetera (Fairclough, 2013). It is critical, in this sense, to examine the narratives around migration and to put these into context with the actor that creates and distributes these narratives to get a grasp on the influence and effect these narratives can have.

The second component is the legitimation strategies that political actors use to justify their proposed policies. I therefore looked at the argumentation used by political actors to justify their migration policy (Reyes, 2011).

To better understand the concept of policy development and legitimation, two components were used in this study. First, the policy feedback loop captures the debate of ‘who influences whom?’ The media and public policy interact with each other in their practices, by highlighting issues that require attention and creating narratives to attach meaning to policy outcomes (Crow & Lawlor, 2016). In this way, the media and political discourse can interact to reinforce or challenge existing policies.

The second component is the legitimation through frames, which focuses on analysing how specific frames legitimize policy choices (Cantat et al., 2023). Framing situations in a specific way can help to convince the public of certain policy choices and grants legitimation (Cantat et al., 2023). Therefore, investigating how specific frames legitimize policy choices help us better understand how these processes happened surrounding Ter Apel.

To capture this in a visual overview, the conceptual framework is represented in the figure below.



3.2 Data collection

To better understand the role of framing, I collected data from interviews, multiple media sources as well as political discourse output. The interviews serve as a knowledge base through which I can better understand framing and framing practices. To keep this research focused, I looked at frames in political and media discourse regarding people that seek asylum and asylum reception centres in the Netherlands, specifically Ter Apel, which remains the main focus of this study. The time frame of the collection of media output starts at the starting point of the process when the decision to locate the departure centre in Ter Apel was made. The centre was established in Ter Apel in 1996, so this study examines media output that focuses on the developments leading up to that moment and extends through to the present day.

The media output relevant to this research originates from various Dutch platforms, offering a balanced representation of both left- and right-leaning perspectives on the political spectrum. There is no specification of platforms that were used, as it was essential to incorporate all the relevant sources to get a good picture of the frames surrounding Ter Apel. By limiting this study to only a selected number of platforms, the possibility to include other relevant sources would have been lost.

To explore how framing influenced the development and legitimation of migration policy in the Netherlands, I gathered data through interviews. In total, I have conducted 6 interviews with 8 different individuals. Due to the privacy and ethics regulations regarding academic

research, I will not mention any names of my respondents. However, I can justify the choice of respondents by mentioning their role in Ter Apel or their expertise on the topic of this thesis. First, I interviewed two experts on the topic of framing, migration and political discourse. In addition, two interviews were conducted with experts on the situation in Ter Apel to gain a clearer understanding of how certain dynamics identified in the literature have manifested on the ground. Last, four interviews were held with key figures who have significantly contributed to the development of the centre or played an important role in shaping narratives surrounding Ter Apel. These experts were approached via email, accompanied by a clear explanation of the research and what participation in an interview entails. Some email addresses were obtained through the network of De Correspondent, which included several relevant individuals. Additionally, LinkedIn served as a useful tool for contacting experts who are relevant to this research.

Given the inductive nature of this research, the selection of individuals and experts to be interviewed evolved over the course of the study. No fixed number of interviews was determined in advance, as doing so would have constrained the flexibility necessary for a responsive and context-driven research process. However, as mentioned above, I interviewed 8 different individuals.

3.3 Data analysis

Since I collected different types of data, it also used different methods to analyse the data. In order to be able to analyse speech or other verbal forms of communication, I used critical discourse analysis. This form of analysis focuses on the relationship between text and its social context, and it investigates how text can be used to create and reproduce certain power structures (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). According to Neumann (2008), critical discourse analysis follows three steps, which I followed during the analysis of the data. First, I delineated the text, meaning I critically decided what to include - in terms of media platform and timeline - and on what grounds (Neumann, 2008). I highlighted these decisions in an earlier paragraph in the methodology chapter. Second, I identified the dominant representations and frames within the discourse and evaluated the (a)symmetries between these representations, as well as how contestable they are (Neumann, 2008). I did this by systematically analysing the textual data to identify recurring representations and frames. I filed similar representations into overarching themes to determine which frames were dominant. To assess (a)symmetries, I

compared how different groups or topics were represented across texts. Furthermore, I examined whether and how these dominant frames were contested, by identifying counter-discourses or alternative narratives within the data (Neumann, 2008). Last, I examined how these different representations within the discourse varied in terms of durability, diversity and degree of dominance or marginalization (Neumann, 2008). I analysed the durability of representations by tracing their presence and consistency across different time periods. I assessed diversity by identifying the range of distinct representations and frames across various texts and sources. To evaluate dominance or marginalization, I examined the tone of each representation, as well as if and how alternative or counter-narratives appeared. In sum, discourse analysis is the systematic analysis of texts, used to identify the underlying representations, frames, and power structures that are created and reinforced through the language used in those texts (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

To analyse images and pictures, I used iconography as the data analysis method. Iconography is mostly used to study artworks, but its methods are applicable for analysing photographs as well (Cassidy, 1996). Cassidy (1996) identifies numerous steps in the analysis process of photographs using the iconography method, which I also followed while analysing relevant photographs for this research. First, the relevant photograph for the analysis was identified, which I did by looking at photographs that have been widely circulated, politically significant or pictures that cover a specific event or period relevant to this research. After I identified the relevant pictures, a broad theme within these pictures was identified, which focuses mostly on deeper levels of thematics that may be present in photographs (Cassidy, 1996). I identified these broader themes by looking beyond the surface-level description and search for implied power relations, emotional cues and framing efforts (Cassidy, 1996). Then, I analysed the photograph to uncover the underlying representations, discourses, and frames embedded in the photograph, including those that may be obscured or taken for granted. I also examined the relationships between these representational layers, paying attention to how they intersect, reinforce, or contradict one another. (Cassidy, 1996). The last step was to interpret the meaning behind the photograph, something which is influenced by subjective perspectives (Cassidy, 1996). I did this by following the steps described above, as well as by identifying emotions that come to light by looking at the photo, by evaluating whether certain perspectives are not visible in the picture and by examining how the picture fits in the broader debate (Cassidy, 1996). In sum, iconography is used to understand the underlying stories, ideas and frames that are captured in visual forms of information (Cassidy, 1996).

To analyse the data gathered through the interviews, I followed the six steps proposed by Plochg and van Zwieten (2007). First, I prepped the data for analysis, which entailed transcribing the interviews, which allowed me to do a first deep dive into the material (Plochg & van Zwieten, 2007). Second, I read and studied all the material in a global manner to get a grip on the data at hand and get a preliminary impression (Plochg & van Zwieten, 2007). Third, I delved deep into the interviews as I started the coding process, where I used open coding to organize the text by attaching codes to text fragments (Plochg & van Zwieten, 2007). I completed this process by using Atlas.ti as a digital tool. Fourth, I stepped back from the material to be able to identify connections in the data, which is done through the second step in the coding process, where I group all the codes given in the first step to possibly improve the identification of connections in the data (Plochg & van Zwieten, 2007). In the code list, which is attached as a separate excel file, I grouped these codes by colour. Each colour represents a theme and serves as a basis for the identification of connections in the data. Fifth, I decided on a logical way to present the data as well as the relationships found during the previous step (Plochg & van Zwieten, 2007). Last, I compare the results of the research with the preliminary problem statement and the literature to generate an interpretation of the interview data (Plochg & van Zwieten, 2007).

During the data collection phase, three methods of data collection were used; an analysis of the literature, interviews and content analysis. In order to formulate an answer to the research question, the data was interpreted by using the method of triangulation. Triangulation is “the combination of two or more data sources, investigators, methodologic approaches, theoretical perspectives, or analytical methods” (Thurmond, 2001, p. 253). Using triangulation is relevant in this study for two reasons. First, by using triangulation, I was able to compare the data from the different data sources (Vennix, 2019). Since there are so many factors and actors that play a role in Ter Apel - media, politics, people from Ter Apel, Dutch citizens and all the organizations involved in Ter Apel and the Dutch asylum system - it was important to go about this research from different angles to formulate a more thorough and comprehensive explanation of the spectacle. Qualitative methods, in this sense, give a more holistic view of the situation under investigation and can consider contextual factors, which is of high importance in this specific case (Jick, 1979). Second, using triangulation can increase the credibility of this study when different sources of data point in the same direction (Vennix, 2019).

This research has an explorative nature, meaning that there is no specific theory or theoretical framework that I tried to prove with this thesis, rather I tried to understand a phenomenon that is present in empirical reality. I therefore adopted an inductive approach, beginning with the observation that Ter Apel plays a central role in the perceived crisis surrounding asylum reception in the Netherlands. From this starting point, I aimed to develop theory to answer the research question, which is why I applied the Grounded Theory approach for theory-building (Khan, 2014). Grounded Theory is a qualitative research methodology focused on generating theory from data rather than testing existing frameworks (Heath & Cowley, 2003). I began by collecting data to identify emerging patterns and to refine my research questions. The process involves iterative cycles of data collection and analysis, gradually narrowing in on a core issue while integrating related factors (Heath & Cowley, 2003). In essence, I use Grounded Theory to ‘discover a binding principle’ (Khan, 2014, p. 224) through close analysis of the collected data, allowing theory to emerge organically from the field.”

Chapter 4 – Analysis of the findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings of the research that is conducted as described in the methodology chapter as well as the analysis of these findings that provide a possible answer to the research question. Through a combined analysis, this chapter aims to uncover how specific meanings around migration and Ter Apel are constructed, negotiated, and maintained within the selected texts. In this chapter, I systematically present the analysis of the findings and organize them based on the themes that were described in the previous chapters. Next to this, I identify and interpret the dominant frames and discourses, including the ways in which they shape public understanding and political narratives. In addition, this chapter reveals the underlying ideologies and power relations embedded in the language and structure of the texts and it lays the foundation for the conclusion by providing evidence-based insights into how representations of Ter Apel across different actors and platforms have shaped that location.

This thesis aims to answer the research question: "*How is the framing of asylum seekers in relation to Ter Apel used to justify and shape asylum migration policy in the Netherlands, and what are its implications for the development of the centre?*"

In this chapter, the findings are presented in order to systematically describe the evidence which allows me to formulate a conclusion in the last chapter of this research. To achieve this, it is important that I analyse the data in a clear and structured manner. First, I will briefly come back to the methods of analysis I described in the methodology chapter. Second, I uncover the findings regarding framing and the relevant ways in which framing occurs in the context of this study. Third, I analyse the findings regarding the CNN-debate as explained in the literature chapter. Fourth, I examine the findings regarding populism and symbol politics and I dive deep into the ways in which these themes occur in Ter Apel. Fifth, I analyse the findings regarding the framing of migrants in general, as well as the principles of othering and bordering and how they are present in Ter Apel. Last, I present the general findings of this study.

4.2 Methods of analysis

4.2.2 Data analysis

To analyse the data, this study uses a combination of analysis methods. First, this study uses a critical discourse analysis retrieved from the work of Neumann (2008). This method of analysis is used to analyse speech and other verbal forms of communication. According to Blommaert & Bulcaen (2000), critical discourse analysis focuses on the relationship between text and its social context and investigates the production and preservation of power structures. Here, the different frames and the analysis of these frames are of importance. This study therefore uses this method to investigate the words spoken and texts written about Ter Apel and migration and the relationship with its social context.

Second, this study uses iconography to analyse pictures and photographs by following the method of Cassidy (1996). This method is used to capture and interpret the underlying stories, ideas and frames that are portrayed in visual forms of information (Cassidy, 1996). Therefore, this study uses this method to evaluate all the visual data regarding migration in general and Ter Apel specifically.

Finally, this study adopts the step-by-step data analysis approach proposed by Plochg and Van Zwieten (2007) to systematically analyse the interview data. Together, these three methodological approaches will guide the interpretation of all collected data. By employing triangulation, i.e. the combination of two or more sources of data and two or more analytical methods (Thurmond, 2001), the study enhances the validity of the findings and facilitates a comprehensive answer to the research question (Vennix, 2019).

4.2.2 Analysis procedure

The analysis takes place in multiple steps. First, the texts, video's, pictures and interviews are read numerous times and initial notes are taken to document initial framing elements, language and positionality. Second, the texts are coded by following the steps described in the methodology chapter. Here special attention is given to the tone, recurring themes and metaphors, as well as to the actor and its positionality. Third, the codes are synthesized into broader interpretations that will form the basis of the findings presented in this chapter.

4.2.3 Citing

All interview data used in this study are cited using respondent numbers (e.g., Respondent 1, Respondent 2) in order to keep the anonymity of the respondents a priority. These interviews are part of the primary data collected specifically for this research. Since the interviews are not publicly accessible, they are referenced in-text as personal communication and are not included in the reference list. Quotes have been translated from Dutch to English where necessary, with careful attention to preserving the original meaning and tone of the respondents' statements.

Data retrieved from the mediatheek at Beeld & Geluid in Hilversum has been cited using APA formatting and can be found in Appendix 1. I will refer to this list in the in-text citations, as well as the source number.

Data retrieved from offline newspapers, which are scanned photos of these texts, are cited using APA formatting and can be found in Appendix 2. I will refer to this list in the in-text citations, as well as the figure number.

Last, data retrieved from online news articles are also cited using APA formatting and a reference list of this data can be found in Appendix 3.

4.3 Framing

4.3.1 Introduction

“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient” (Entman, 1993, p.52). Frames have already been extensively studied by previous scholars, and Entman's definition is the most widely used and most frequently cited. Frames can exert power by portraying a situation or actor in a particular way, thereby placing them within a context that shapes how the outside world perceives them. In this way, frames can have a profound influence on how we view the world around us. This also applies to how Dutch society

perceives Ter Apel, as I will argue below. Therefore, it is relevant to examine how framing operates, and how it specifically manifests in the case of Ter Apel. I do this by relying on data from interviews, which I analysed using the steps stated by Plochg and van Zwieten (2007), as I explained in the methodology chapter.

As I described in an earlier chapter, I draw on Entman's (1993) framing theory and his four key locations—the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture—which each play a role in the framing process. This theoretical lens informs how I examine and analyse the data. Accordingly, I will use these four locations as a framework to guide my analysis of the framing of asylum migration and Ter Apel. This subsection also adopts the structure of these four locations, which I will discuss one by one.

4.3.2 The communicator

In the literature chapter, I discussed that the activation, dissemination, and reinforcement of frames by communicators always serve a specific political purpose. As a communicator, one seeks to define a particular issue, assign causality or identify a scapegoat, and propose a potential solution (Entman, 1993). The way in which a situation is framed as a problem, and how blame is allocated, significantly influences whether and how the audience perceives the situation as problematic (Entman, 1993). Communicators thus hold considerable power, as they possess the ability to shape individuals' perceptions of reality. I will elaborate later on which actors can be seen as a communicator in the case of Ter Apel and how they operate. First, however, it is important to examine how such a communicator can achieve success. After all, this is only possible if the receiver finds the communicator credible and perceives the message as convincing. During my interview with respondent 1, we talked about the main goals that a communicator tries to achieve with a certain frame.

“[Frames] touch on values. [A communicator can] tell you, like, hey, this is what you should find important. And if you're open to that, yeah then then, then a frame can, like, set something in motion” (Respondent 1, personal communication, March 2025).

Appealing to a particular value with the intention of making it seem important is therefore a crucial strategy that the communicator must employ in order to make their framing efforts successful. However, findings from other interviews revealed that the process is somewhat more complex. Not everyone can be persuaded by this rhetorical device; after all, not all Dutch citizens support the PVV's migration policy, despite the party's efforts to convince the public

that closing the borders and detaining people who are seeking asylum are matters of high importance. In this regard, the identity of the communicator emerged as a significant factor.

“I definitely think the sender matters. Um, even if only because certain groups who hear the message won’t take it seriously. Like, if, say, VluchtelingenWerk says something, someone who is very, very anti-refugee won’t take that seriously, because they’re the refugee-huggers. Uh, and if Geert Wilders says something, then maybe I won’t take that seriously, because yeah, it’s Geert Wilders. Yeah. Um. So yeah, I do think the sender matters” (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).

The argument that the identity of the sender is crucial for a message to be perceived as credible by the receiver also emerged in other interviews, albeit sometimes in more subtle ways. For instance, Respondent 2 referred to “*all that squawking from Wilders and Faber about migration*” (Respondent 2, personal communication, March 2025).

Building on this, an important point was raised concerning the audience of the communicator.

“People who watch [positive media coverage of migration] are people who are already interested anyway. They’re not the people who throw signs or eggs at the town hall of Sint Michielsgestel” (Respondent 2, personal communication, March 2025).

4.3.3 The text

As demonstrated in the literature, the text—within the framing theory of Entman (1993)—refers to all written words, sentences, and the embedded frames therein. In this paragraph, I will primarily focus on how frames function, as mentioned above, while the specific situations in which this becomes evident in the context of Ter Apel will be addressed in a later section. The respondents were nearly unanimous in emphasizing the importance of word choice when discussing migration.

Yes, I think the words you use are really important. Um, and and also really, yeah, really contribute to the feeling people get about something — you really, that — that really shouldn’t be underestimated (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).

Respondent 1 expressed similar ideas and provided an example that clearly illustrates how this works. This example was also mentioned by Respondents 2 and 4.

What I always read in those studies is that it's really very much, indeed, like you said — that sense of control, more the word, "We need to regain control," so more control, so that kind of says it. So now there's panic, or now, now things aren't working out, so we need to do something about it (Respondent 1, personal communication, March 2025).

By stating that we need to regain control over migration, the impression is created that there is currently no control, that the situation is out of control. According to the respondents, this does not only occur with the word control, but also with other terms. Respondent 1 highlighted several additional words that subconsciously evoke a certain feeling in the reader.

Um, so I think that's very, um, yeah, that's really important to think about — what kind of words you choose. And besides giving that feeling of "we don't have control," it's also just very dehumanizing. So like, a flow, a wave, a — yeah, then it's not really about people. Even that word "asylum seekers" is already, in a certain way, dehumanizing, because then you — yeah. You're not a person, you're an asylum seeker (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).

It thus becomes clear that word choice in the context of migration is highly significant. Language can appeal to the emotions of the audience and influence the feelings they are left with after reading the chosen terms. Moreover, it can have a dehumanizing effect, as individuals or groups may be labelled simply as "asylum seekers" rather than, for instance, a father, mother, teacher, doctor, or any other identity with which the person may associate themselves.

When discussing the power of language, one crucial point must not be overlooked: the word *Ter Apel* itself. To illustrate the significance of this, I offer a brief anecdote. During my internship, I visited Ter Apel on several occasions to join my supervisor on reporting assignments. I shared these experiences enthusiastically at home, and during a conversation with a friend, she asked me, "Where exactly is Ter Apel located?" I replied: "In the southeast of Groningen, near the German border." Her response: "Oh no, I meant—in which city?" She didn't know that Ter Apel is a village; she assumed it was the name of the asylum centre. I couldn't blame her for this misunderstanding. *Ter Apel* has, in effect, become a word—a

symbol. When one hears *Ter Apel*, the association is immediate: people who seek asylum, tents outside the gate, young men sleeping on the grass. What is often forgotten is that Ter Apel is also a place with a rich local life—a village with a historic monastery, residents who attend football practice, and entrepreneurs trying to make a success of a recreational campsite.

This confusion is perhaps understandable, as even newspapers often fail to clearly distinguish whether their reporting concerns the asylum registration centre in Ter Apel or the village itself. As a result, *Ter Apel* has suffered considerable reputational damage in recent years, having become almost exclusively associated with the asylum centre. This once again illustrates how important and sensitive word choice is—and how language can profoundly shape people's perceptions and experiences.

4.3.4 The receiver

The literature already showed that the role of the receiver is important to say something about the framing effect, since the receiver is the actor who's view of a situation is influenced through certain frames. Therefore, during the interview, the role of the receiver was also discussed extensively. Respondent 1 talked about how personal values of the receiver determine whether frames can influence their perspective.

“They appeal to certain values that you find important. And that is different for every person, what you find important in life—something that you, in general, just find important in life. And we all actually find all values important to some degree, but from within yourself, you are tuned differently than maybe your neighbour, or anyone else. And frames can remind you that you should find a certain value important” (Respondent 1, personal communication, March 2025).

Respondent 1 further noted that these values can be activated at different times by different actors. It was especially important what actor appealed to what value. Respondent 1 explains this by giving an example:

“The moment [a family member gives their opinion about migrants] to you, then you think, oh yeah, and then, then you might feel something about it. But at the moment that—I don't know—a friend or someone else or, whatever, someone says to you, like, hey, but we're all human beings, and also people who are refugees are just the same as you and me, they want the same things, we all want to live together comfortably here. Then you think again, yeah, and maybe

you're pulled in another direction again. Or when you see a video or a campaign from Stichting Vluchteling with real children in need and a lot of drama, then you think, yeah, but we really have to help them after all” (Respondent 1, personal communication, March 2025).

4.3.5 The culture

As noted in the literature, the term *culture* refers to the shared and habitual frames that are accepted within a social group. This concept resurfaced in the interviews, particularly in discussions about the use of certain words known to have a negative impact on perceptions of migration. I have already touched upon the influence of specific words earlier in this chapter, such as *grip* and *asylum seeker*. These types of terms are deeply embedded in the language used within our society, which makes it relevant to yet again highlight an example here. The water metaphors, such as *inflow*, *overflow*, *tsunami* or *wave* are often used unconsciously and are embedded in the Dutch language, yet they implicitly convey a negative attitude toward migrants.

“Yeah, all those water metaphors that you—that are—that are often used about asylum seekers, like, uh, there's a stream of migrants coming, a tsunami, and uh, we're being flooded—that—that maybe it has an extra effect in the Netherlands, as this kind of little dike country, that—that it has extra influence on our psyche, like water—no, we don't want that” (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).

“What do you do when a wave or a stream just comes at you? Then you start building dikes and dams” (Respondent 1, personal communication, March 2025).

Such a widely accepted cultural framework can be difficult to change. As Respondent 4 observed, choosing alternative language to replace the commonly used water metaphors is more challenging than expected.

“A good alternative for the word instroom (inflow). Yeah, then you very quickly end up with something like ‘number of applications’. The number of applications or something, or well, yeah, so an alternative for the word asylum seekers would be people who are applying for asylum, but then that’s quickly a lot more words—you have to use more words for it, which makes your text actually less readable. Yeah. Yeah. Um, so you're also quickly inclined,

especially in headlines above articles, to just go with instroom or asielzoekers, because it's just shorter and more concise. Um. So that—so it's really not all that easy, I think, to find the right words for that” (Respondent 4, personal communication, March 2025).

Although all respondents agreed that such word choices are undesirable in the context of migration, it proved difficult not to follow the dominant linguistic conventions of society. Several respondents still frequently used the term *inflow*. According to Respondent 4, this was due to the lack of a suitable alternative that is easy to use in conversation.

4.3.6 Interpretation of the findings

The data points to the idea that frames can evoke specific values within us, something that is heavily leveraged in the migration debate from both sides. On the one hand, there is an appeal to our humanitarian values: the moral imperative to offer protection to those in need. On the other hand, there is an appeal to realism: the need to safeguard your security and to remain cautious about admitting unfamiliar people and cultures.

These opposing appeals are reinforced by the language used to describe people who seek asylum. When these individuals are labelled as criminals, it becomes easier to justify strict border controls, as such measures are framed as necessary for protecting our safety. Conversely, when they are portrayed as victims, our humanitarian values are more strongly activated, making it easier to morally justify offering help and shelter to those in distress.

Moreover, language use in our culture is often embedded with connotations, mostly negative, that can unconsciously reinforce particular frames. It is therefore unsurprising that frames within the migration debate can have such a profound impact. Migration is not merely a policy issue; it touches on deeply held values and emotions that people are highly motivated to protect.

4.4 The CNN-effect, what role does the media play?

4.4.1 Introduction

In the literature review, I discussed a debate concerning the role of the media in framing processes. The central question was whether the media merely reflects and reports on events occurring in the world and in politics, or whether it actively contributes to and influences these events. In this chapter, I will examine the role played by the media, whether active or passive,

and the extent of the influence it may exert. I will also briefly address specific examples illustrating how this occurs in the context of Ter Apel; this will also be more extensively discussed in a later chapter when I elaborate on the framing of migrants. I will analyse the data gathered from the interviews according to the steps by Plochg and van Zwieten (2007), as explained in the methods chapter. The newspaper articles and media sources used for this chapter serve a supporting role, as they contribute to reinforcing the argument rather than forming its core. I analysed this material using critical discourse analysis, as outlined by Neumann (2008). In this chapter, the focus is primarily on identifying dominant frames and interpreting them within their broader social context.

The role of the media has been widely debated, and the respondents have shared their perspectives on this issue. Their insights suggest that the matter is less clear-cut than the binary opposition often presented in the literature.

4.4.1 The media as a passive reporter

In the interviews, I found little evidence supporting the perspective that the media is a passive actor merely reporting on events in the world. Respondent 2 did lean in this direction and remarked the following on the matter:

The media, of course, to a significant extent determine what people take in. But there is, of course, an interaction between the two, so the media also focuses on what people are interested in (Respondent 2, personal communication, March 2025).

This revealed that the respondent believes the media indeed plays a significant role, as it shapes the images people are exposed to regarding current events. At the same time, according to this respondent, the media also occupies a more passive role by following the interests of the public.

4.4.2 The media as an active influencer

This leads us directly to the next point. The reason the media follows the interests of the public is that doing so helps maintain popularity and generate revenue. However, this has implications for the truthfulness and quality of the news, a topic that was frequently discussed in the interviews.

The media focuses, of course, on things that are um exciting and um exceptional and um dramatic. And not on everything that's just going well. It's not news if there's an asylum centre in a neighbourhood where everyone is happy with it. So um so in the media, it's all the things that are not going well that get covered (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).

An event is considered newsworthy only when it is deemed exceptional, which is often accompanied by a degree of sensationalism. The interviews highlight that this presents a dilemma for the media in how they report on such situations.

And every now and then I talk to journalists as well about, yeah, a sort of dilemma they're in, on the one hand, like, hey, this is the leader of the largest party, so what he says is newsworthy. What's happening in Ter Apel also fits the criteria for newsworthiness. But especially that they also sometimes really realize, this, this benefits the PVV if we give attention to everything Wilders says. But yeah, it's also our journalistic duty to report on what's happening. It's actually quite difficult for journalists, some of them really do feel it as a dilemma (Respondent 1, personal communication, March 2025).

I will now elaborate on an example that clearly illustrates how the media can actively influence the perceptions of its audience. According to Respondent 1, this was also the first time people in asylum centres in the Netherlands were negatively framed in the media as dangerous and disruptive individuals. The incident took place in Kollum, a small rural village in Friesland, located near an AZC. On the same day that two people that were seeking asylum had left the centre without a known destination, Marianne Vaatstra, a teenage girl, was found raped and murdered in a nearby field (Brandpunt, 2013, as cited in transcript folder, source 16). Respondent 4 noted that *“it was quickly claimed that it must have been someone from the AZC,”* (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025) a suggestion that was subsequently picked up and treated as fact by the media. Shortly thereafter, plans for a new AZC in the area were altered, following a public meeting during which local residents threw eggs at representatives from the COA.

I do think that, look, that has always been the case, that there can be resistance against asylum centres, but often that resistance is stirred up by something that has appeared in the media (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).

An episode of NOVA (1999) showed an interaction between a local from Kollum and the presenter of the program, which clearly illustrates how negative portrayals of people who seek asylum can rapidly escalate and may be based on assumptions rather than facts.

“Veenstra (AZC NO): We think they are breeding grounds for criminal activities. We do not agree with them. Human trafficking, trading stolen goods—there are a whole lot of things happening there.

Interviewer: Where does that image come from?

Veenstra: Through the media.

Interviewer: Have you ever been to an AZC?

Veenstra: No, I’ve never been there and I’d rather not go. We know what an AZC brings with it: nuisance, intimidation, indifference, theft, rape, and murder. (NOVA, 1999, as cited in transcription folder, source 12).”

Recently, a similar event occurred in Berlicum, a small town in Brabant, where there were rumours about the possible establishment of an AZC. According to Hart van Nederland (2025), local residents were "*celebrating their victory with drinks*" after successfully preventing the establishment of the asylum seekers' centre (AZC). This opposition was not without violence; protests erupted in the village during which *demonstrators pelted the town hall of Sint-Michielsgestel, under whose jurisdiction Berlicum falls, with eggs and smoke flares (De Volkskrant, 2025).*

Omroep Brabant (2025) reported on the protest, revealing that residents were particularly angry due to a rumour suggesting that the AZC in Berlicum would be designated exclusively for young men. I want to highlight an important issue here: media discourse frequently labels certain groups—especially men traveling alone—using inaccurate or harmful terminology. These individuals are often referred to as *fortune seekers (gelukszoekers)*, or more recently, as *safe country nationals (veilige landers)*. These labels typically refer to young men originating

from countries not currently experiencing war or acute crisis, and who are therefore perceived as not being “real” refugees.

This group of people seeking asylum is frequently associated with public nuisance in Dutch media. For instance, Nu.nl (2022) emphasized that such individuals come to the Netherlands in search of *free welfare benefits* and often suffer from psychological issues such as addiction. RTV Noord used terms like “*criminal safe country nationals*” and described them as “*without prospects*.” Similarly, NOS (2022) reported incidents in Utrecht involving safe country nationals related to intimidation, pickpocketing, and violent offenses.

It is important to clarify that this argument is not intended to downplay the seriousness of public disturbances, nor to question the factual accuracy of these incidents. However, what must be emphasized is the link between media portrayals of male individuals seeking asylum and public protests against AZCs in the Netherlands. As the academic literature has argued, this is not a neutral correlation—it is a matter of cause and effect. When news audiences are repeatedly exposed to narratives that associate people who seek asylum with criminal behaviour or social disruption, a belief is constructed that such problems are a natural consequence of an AZC being established.

These findings presented above illustrate the significant influence of the media on public perception and outcomes, positioning the media as an active and powerful actor in the Dutch migration debate.

4.4.3 Interpretation of the findings

It is evident that in the context of migration and *Ter Apel*, the media plays a clear and influential role. Through its choice of language and the way it frames events, the media shapes both the emotional response and the perception of its audience. It would therefore be inaccurate to claim that the media merely follows and reports on the public debate. To believe so, in my view, would be to overlook the power and influence the media exerts through the selection of specific perspectives and terminology. The media thus occupies an active, rather than passive, position in the migration debate.

4.5 Populism

4.5.1 Introduction

As the literature has demonstrated, populism is primarily concerned with the construction of a shared identity of "the people," defined in opposition to a corrupt political elite. This elite is portrayed as self-serving, prioritizing its own interests over those of ordinary citizens. The populist, in contrast, claims to represent the true will of the people and seeks to mobilize them against the practices and authority of the political establishment. The data gathered on populism in the context of Ter Apel was analysed by using the method of Plochg and van Zwieten (2007), to analyse interview data. For an elaborate explanation of these steps, I refer to the methods chapter of this thesis.

In the case of Ter Apel, this dynamic manifests in three ways according to the interview data: first, populist actors in The Hague frame Dutch citizens as "the people" who are fighting against the elites. In the case of the PVV, the elites are associated with leniency towards migration and a lack of care for the safety of "the people". Second, the interviews revealed that right-wing politicians in the Netherlands tend to focus on telling the public what it wants to hear, rather than on seeking viable solutions (Respondent 2, personal communication, March 2025; Respondent 3, personal communication, March 2025), which is an approach that is characteristic of populism. Third, local residents perceive the political elite in The Hague as the real populists—positioning themselves as neglected or marginalized, effectively being cast as "unimportant" in political decision-making processes (Respondent 6, personal communication, March 2025; Respondent 7, personal communication, March 2025). According to the residents of Ter Apel, parties such as the PVV are vocal in their desire to reduce migration and frequently cite Ter Apel as a key reason for the urgency of this issue. However, these parties are not perceived to be actively engaged in identifying or implementing concrete solutions to address the actual problems faced in Ter Apel. I will now explain these three manifestations of populism by providing the data I have gathered as evidence for my arguments.

4.5.2 The people versus the problem

The first point I make can be substantiated with clear evidence. For instance, in his declaration of independence published on his party's website, Geert Wilders states the following:

“Geert Wilders presents his broad programme for a better Netherlands. Goal: to give the country back to the citizens and to launch a frontal attack on the elite (Onafhankelijkheidsverklaring, 2005).”

As I showed in the literature review, and as I reiterated above, a key characteristic of populism is the unification of 'the people' through opposition to the political elite. Wilders explicitly states that this is his political aim. In addition, he targets another group: foreigners. This began several years ago, at the time he wrote the declaration of independence I quoted earlier, with resistance to Islam. In his party's 2021 election manifesto, he wrote the following:

“It is an existential problem: the survival of a free Netherlands depends on the extent to which we are able to push back Islam (Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025).”

The most recent elections, however, were mostly focused on the topic of migration. In this light, Wilders' focus shifted more explicitly from opposition to Islam toward opposition to migrants. This opposition is often framed through arguments suggesting that migrants pose a threat to public safety, that their presence undermines Dutch culture, and that the Netherlands is, in effect, no longer 'for the Dutch.'

“PVV leader Geert Wilders wants to close mosques and Islamic schools, and to ban the Quran. Citizens with dual nationality would no longer be allowed to vote or be elected (Nu.nl, 2021).”

These statements can clearly be regarded as populist, as they align with all the key characteristics discussed in the literature.

4.5.3 The role of truth in populism

The second point related to populism that I address in my thesis concerns the role of truth. As discussed in the literature, populism often revolves around telling the people what they want to hear, with truth not always playing a central role. This theme also emerged frequently in the interviews, with several respondents offering their perspectives on it.

“People like to say what they want to say [...]. They don't tell reality [...]. People take the facts, they cherry-pick things. What is useful to them in a discourse is what they present to us, but it is never the whole story (Respondent 2, personal communication, March 2025).”

“Specifically in the asylum debate, so little is based on facts. Uh, I mean, we have a government that makes policy based on a perceived asylum crisis, quote the Prime Minister (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).”

According to the respondents, the absence of truth and factual accuracy in the asylum debate can be clearly explained. They observe the behaviour of politicians and how they engage with the media when it comes to asylum and migration, identifying clear populist characteristics. After all, the focus lies on telling the public what it wants to hear, rather than on what is actually correct.

“And the attitude that especially politicians like Faber and the BBB and the PVV, and to some extent also the VVD, take is: what we want simply has to happen — and if it doesn’t happen willingly, then it will happen by force. Then we’ll just use the media to create a certain idea, and they no longer care at all about the science or the reality of this problem (Respondent 3, personal communication, March 2025).”

“So a problem is deliberately created in order to suggest that there is a massive influx and that we cannot cope with it. People sleeping on the streets, having to sleep in tents — that creates an image of ‘you see, it’s unbearable, it’s real, it’s getting out of hand (Respondent 2, personal communication, March 2025).”

According to the respondents, the absence of facts and truth in discussions or debates on asylum is closely linked to the manipulation of the media. Another important aspect that emerged from the interviews is the role of language. As I discussed earlier, language use in the media plays a significant role, and the same arguments apply in this context. What is particularly relevant in relation to populism is the idea that a debate or specific terminology can be hijacked by populists. As a result, the use of certain terms can reinforce the populist narrative, regardless of who actually uses them.

“And I think that the far right, or right-wing populists, are very good at taking those kinds of words and incorporating them into their own discourse, and in doing so, they kind of contaminate them for everyone else. [...] So then, if you, as someone who is not a right-wing populist, want to respond, you’re almost forced to speak using their words, which ends up reinforcing their frames, even though that’s not what you want at all. You just want to use something like ‘control’ in a kind of neutral sense, but it’s been used so many times by Wilders

that by talking about 'control,' you're actually reinforcing his frames (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025)."

In this way, the populist makes it increasingly difficult to engage in a discussion about migration that does not conform to their framing, as all such discussions become associated with the populist's way of thinking and argumentation. Talking about the need to gain control over migration, for instance, immediately evokes associations with the far-right populist who advocates closing borders and implementing strict controls over who may enter the Netherlands. However, such concerns could just as easily be expressed by a left-wing politician who supports increased migration but also considers regulation important. These practices are thus employed to reinforce the populist narrative about who the 'enemy of the people' is and how that people should act in response.

It is, of course, very challenging for journalists to navigate this issue, because, as mentioned, they do not want to operate within the frames used by right-wing populist politicians to convey their message. I asked Respondent 4 about the role journalism plays in this context and whether there are ways for journalists to engage with the topic without reinforcing the frames set by right-wing politicians.

"Yes, as a counterbalance to the fast news reporting that keeps doing this. That tends to always highlight those exceptions as if they are the rule, and reports on every hyped-up incident without calmly thinking about whether it really symbolizes something broader and more systematic — or if it's just exactly what it is: an incident (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025)."

Although this response clearly indicated that there are strategies journalists can adopt to avoid operating within the frames of right-wing populist politicians, the message also came with an important disclaimer.

"Right-wing populist parties are also very good at playing into this, right? So, well, I thought the ribbon incident was a brilliant example of that. For once, the focus wasn't on migration for a moment. It was actually about Ukraine. Wilders doesn't have a strong story on that. So what do they do? Create a silly, very strange controversy that brings the focus back to migration. Yes. Um, because then the media jumps on it again, and so it becomes acceptable in politics to talk about migration once more (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025)."

4.5.4 Populism in Ter Apel

In Ter Apel, residents experience the negative consequences of the populist behaviour of politicians, who often use grand rhetoric and say what the people want to hear, yet fail to take concrete action. Populist politicians do not primarily focus on solving problems, but rather on constructing a shared sense of ‘the people’ and identifying a ‘common enemy’ against whom these people must define themselves. They claim to stand alongside the public in a collective struggle against perceived opposition, but in Ter Apel, this has largely translated into strong words without meaningful action.

“My level of irritation is incredibly high because of the political unwillingness to actually do something about it. And it gets pushed away to the periphery. We’re not affected by it. And well, in Groningen, people don’t complain that easily (Respondent 7, personal communication, March 2025).”

This became particularly evident when Minister Faber announced a few months ago that she intended to pilot the PBA, or 'Process Availability Approach.' This approach is a modified version of the earlier PBL, or 'Process Availability Location,' where people who apply for asylum and caused disturbances were required to stay at a designated location for 22 hours a day, with only a two-hour window to leave for essentials such as grocery shopping. Due to a legal error, the PBL was shut down several years ago. The newly proposed PBA would look different, requiring people to report to the centre twice a day. However, this did not make the locals of Ter Apel feel any safer. In their view, this system still allowed disruptive individuals seeking asylum ample opportunity to engage in problematic behaviour outside of the mandatory reporting times. According to the residents, this was poorly handled by Minister Faber and made them feel as though their concerns were not being taken seriously.

“There’s only one, uh, issue that counts here in this village, [the asylum issue], and there’s no way to get any improvement on it. I mean, you go from the PBL to the PBA. Well, honestly. An announcement requirement. But then you’ve really been sniffed out by the rat, because then you haven’t understood it (Respondent 7, personal communication, March 2025).”

One of the respondents called the situation by its name, stating that Ter Apel is often used as *political bargaining chips* (Respondent 7, personal communication, March 2025). An example was given in which a state secretary admitted he could not push too strongly for improving conditions in Ter Apel — despite his party’s official stance in favour of doing so — because this would require concessions in another policy area deemed more important to the party. This contributes, not unjustifiably, to the perception that the problems in Ter Apel are not taken seriously and that politics is largely a matter of backroom deals and trade-offs.

“All sorts of barriers are being thrown up — yes, I say it’s simply stalling, stalling the process of moving toward a goal that would actually help us. And then you hear everyone say: ‘Yes, no, we want what’s best for Ter Apel.’ No, you’re delaying. You’re stalling. This is not a solution (Respondent 7, personal communication, March 2025).”

According to the respondents, this is compounded by a sense that they are being misled by politicians. Not only is there a lack of active efforts to address the problems the village is facing, but factually incorrect figures are also presented with the intention of creating the impression that the nuisance is less severe than it actually is. This, in turn, leads to a decline in public trust in politics.

“You just have to be honest. And look, but that’s also the thing, no, name it as it is. I’m absolutely convinced, all these years that I’ve been here, that honesty about the numbers and about the situation works much better with people and creates much more trust (Respondent 6, personal communication, March 2025).”

“All of Ter Apel hears trauma helicopters. But on I12 Groningen or whatever, nothing to be seen. All calm. But every evening, something happens. And then, yeah, look, people aren’t stupid, right? (Respondent 7, personal communication, March 2025).”

To conclude this chapter I would like to come back to the essence of populism and why all the issues discussed in the quotes I presented above still exist. One of the respondents was spot on when attempting to explain the political unwillingness to address problems. This clearly illustrates why populists say what the people want to hear rather than simply doing what they believe is best to solve issues.

“Ideally, the raison d’être of politicians, administrators, is to solve problems. No, [in reality] the raison d’être of politicians is to get re-elected. And that is a very different interest (Respondent 3, personal communication, March 2025).”

4.5.5 Symbol politics and populism

In the theoretical framework chapter, I discussed the role of symbols in politics, and more specifically, the relationship between symbols and populism. Symbols help us make sense of the world by simplifying complex realities and attributing value to certain elements (Helsloot, 2017). This makes them powerful, as they shape how people perceive reality (Helsloot, 2017). Respondent 4 observes this dynamic in the context of Ter Apel as well. It is primarily Minister Faber who, according to the respondent, proposes symbolic measures without implementing them. For example, Respondent 4 mentioned the minister’s intention to install “return signs” as a symbolic gesture of a tough stance on people seeking asylum (personal communication, May 2025). These signs are meant to signal that the minister wants people who seek asylum in the Netherlands to return to their country of origin. However, in practice, such measures have no real effect. No individual seeking asylum will read a sign and seriously consider returning to an unsafe country merely because a sign instructs them to do so. Respondent 4 provides the following additional example:

“She does often talk about, you know, further austerity. Yeah, I’ve been in those little houses. We really have no way to make them more austere. There are just two lockers and, uh, two little beds, and that’s it. You could still remove the lamp (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).”

In this case, the austerity measures in asylum reception can also be understood as a way to signal to the public that the government seeks to minimize investment in the accommodation of people applying for asylum and to make the Netherlands as unattractive a destination as possible for them. However, according to Respondent 3, such measures have little to no practical effect.

“If that deterrence actually worked, you would expect that zero [...] asylum seekers would report themselves in Belgium. But they still do. [...] A connection is made as if people flee based on something like: Let’s see. Um, in Belgium they only have peanut

butter, in France they also—oh, in France they have peanut butter and Camembert, then we'll go there. Yes. As if it's a travel guide. And that's not the case. There is countless research indicating that family ties and, um, a network of acquaintances already present in a certain destination country are much more important factors in choosing a destination (Respondent 3, personal communication, March 2025)."

Ultimately, it is primarily about creating the impression, through the use of symbolic actions such as return signs, border controls, and the further austerity of an already minimal reception system, that people applying for asylum are being dealt with in a strict manner. Symbolic politics and populism often go hand in hand, and in both cases, the primary objective is not necessarily to solve problems, as one might expect from those in governing positions. As Dittmer (1997) argued, symbols are frequently employed by political elites to protect and legitimize their power. This dynamic is also evident in the situation in Ter Apel. Minister Faber and the PVV secured their place in the cabinet in part through their promised tough stance on people applying for asylum. According to voters, this position served to legitimize their claim to power in the House of Representatives. However, one year after the cabinet's inauguration, little has changed, and rhetoric has largely outweighed action. In this case, the rhetoric, the austerity of asylum reception, border controls, and return signs, functions as symbolic action aimed at maintaining their political power.

4.5.6 Interpretation of the findings

Populism is clearly evident in the discourse surrounding Ter Apel and migration. Whereas the literature primarily focuses on the dichotomy between “the people” and “the elite,” this context reveals multiple actors positioned in opposition to one another, driven into categories through specific terminology and selective presentation of facts—categorization that does not always have a positive effect on outcomes. It is apparent that populist politicians can ‘contaminate’ certain words, rendering them unusable for parties seeking to operate outside populist frameworks. Consequently, populists exert significant power and control over the debate, making it extremely difficult for alternative voices to be heard without conforming to populist frames. Furthermore, the frequent instrumentalization of Ter Apel as political bargaining chip, coupled with a reluctance to genuinely address the village's problems, has led residents to grow weary of mere political rhetoric. Ultimately, politics boils down to politicians

saying what the people want to hear, as their survival in parliament depends on being re-elected.

4.6 Framing of migrants

4.6.1 Introduction

In the literature, I identified four dominant frames that frequently appear in representations of migrants: as a threat, as an economic burden, as victims in need of help, or as ordinary individuals with the potential to integrate and contribute to society. During the data collection process, I encountered media articles, tv programs, political speeches and answers from respondents that reciprocated one or more of these frames. In nearly every news article, television segment, and photograph, stereotypes and framing devices were present, revealing how the sender perceives migrants, whether they are seen as important, pitiable, or problematic.

The aim of this chapter is not to conduct an exhaustive analysis of all Dutch media, as this has already been the subject of various studies (Brouwer et al., 2017; d'Haenens & de Lange, 2001; Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007; Schoor & Viola, 2023). Rather, the objective is to examine how these frames manifest specifically in media coverage related to Ter Apel and migration in the Netherlands. How can we understand the narrative of Ter Apel's development into the symbolic centre of Dutch asylum policy through the lens of these frames?

In this chapter, I will address each of the four frames discussed in the literature and systematically demonstrate how the framing of migrants shapes the discourse and policy surrounding Ter Apel. Finally, I will explore the concepts of bordering and othering within this context and show how these dynamics are reflected in the case of Ter Apel.

In this chapter, the three forms of analysis employed in this thesis have been closely integrated to create a comprehensive picture of how people applying for asylum in Ter Apel are framed, and how this framing influences the development of the reception centre. The methods of analysis have been extensively described in the methods section, therefore I will only briefly describe how I went about the process of analysis here. The interviews were analysed using the steps outlined by Plochg and Van Zwieten (2007), where I started the analysis process by coding the interview transcripts, which I further categorized using broader themes that later helped me identify patterns in the interview data. The audiovisual data from Beeld & Geluid was examined through Critical Discourse Analysis based on the methods of Neumann (2008)

and the theoretical framework of Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000), where I first identified the dominant representations and frames within the text or discourse and evaluated the symmetries or asymmetries between these representations. Last, the photographs were analysed following Cassidy's (1996) iconographic method, which I followed by first identifying an underlying theme based on emotions, power relations and framing efforts. Next, I critically assessed whether certain perspectives were left out and the broader (political) debate in which the picture could fit. This helped me to interpret the picture in light of the analysis for this thesis.

4.6.2 Migrants as threats

The frame of migrants as a threat is highly indicative of the way Ter Apel is perceived. This perception has significantly shaped policy decisions over the years, contributing to the development of the centre as it exists today. The dataset contains a large number of newspaper articles discussing public disturbances in Ter Apel. From these texts, a clear discourse emerges in which migrants, and more specifically people applying for asylum, are framed as a source of nuisance and disruption (EenVandaag, 2023, as cited in transcription folder, source 6). This framing is constructed through language use, ideological mechanisms, and power relations.

Terms such as “*threat*,” “*nuisance*,” “*shoplifting*,” and “*feelings of insecurity*” are consistently linked to the presence of people applying for asylum or individuals from outside the local community (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 17; Dagblad van het Noorden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 18; Dagblad van het Noorden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 19). During the period in which it operated solely as a departure centre, it was referred to as the “*camp of the hopeless (Radio 1 Ochtendjournaal, 1996, as cited in transcript folder, source 15)*.” This language is highly charged and activates associations with criminality and deviance. People applying for asylum are portrayed as troublesome and are depicted as being excluded from mainstream society. They “*come from Oeroe Boeroe countries, they can't write, and they can't read, they can't do anything (NOVA, 2022, as cited in transcript folder, source 13)*”. As early as 1994, a communication professor at the University of Amsterdam observed in a 2Vandaag broadcast that “*there is currently no positive image of the asylum seeker (2Vandaag, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 10)*.” He argued that the media discourse had shifted away from personal narratives explaining individuals' reasons for migration, toward an emphasis on crime and disorder associated with people applying for asylum (2Vandaag, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 10).

Moreover, individual incidents are framed as indicative of a collective problem. Rather than being presented as isolated events, I argue that they are interpreted as symptoms of a larger structural issue: the arrival of foreigners. As a result, the focus shifts from the specific act to the group as a whole. An example of this dynamic can be found in media coverage of shoplifting, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

In addition, I argue that power relations are continuously reproduced through the dominant presence of local voices in the discourse. As a result, migrants themselves are largely excluded from the conversation, which enables the persistent framing of them as a threat. I argue that this selective representation not only reinforces existing narratives of fear and exclusion, but also serves to uphold the underlying power structures that support such discourses.

In this next section, I examine three key themes that emerge in relation to the perceived nuisance caused by people applying for asylum, and the ways in which these are represented in the media. First, I explore the connection often made between people applying for asylum and criminal behaviour, particularly in relation to shoplifting and intimidation. Second, I analyse the emergence of the citizens' patrol in Ter Apel, which arose as a reaction to such perceived disturbances. Finally, I discuss a specific incident in which tensions in the village culminated in a fight at the local fair, examining how media representations of this event contribute to the broader framing of people who apply for asylum as a threat.

Refugees and criminality

The vast majority of shopkeepers represented in the dataset express concerns about the presence of people applying for asylum in Ter Apel (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 20). While not all of these voices are overtly hostile or explicitly accusatory, there is a discernible and recurring association between people who are applying for asylum and criminal behaviour. This connection primarily manifests in reports of shoplifting, intimidation, and groups loitering around commercial areas (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2011, as cited in dataset, figure 2; Dagblad van het Noorden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 18; KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1). As noted earlier, these perceptions are reinforced through consistent lexical choices in the articles, language that frames people who are applying for asylum as inherently problematic and dangerous. I find that such representations legitimize and sustain a broader atmosphere of fear in the village,

providing justification for the introduction of surveillance technologies and the tightening of security measures.

One clear example of this dynamic is the reported increase in CCTV surveillance in the town, which several shopkeepers describe as a necessary step to obtain hard evidence of theft and to deter future incidents (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2011, as cited in dataset, figure 2). In addition, some shopkeepers note a decline in customer visits and express concern that staff feel unsafe working alone (Nieuwsbode, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 20). These experiences suggest that the sense of threat is not necessarily rooted in direct incidents, but rather emerges from a fear of the unknown and the circulation of local narratives of nuisance. This contributes to a growing *us-versus-them* mentality, in which people applying for asylum are positioned as outsiders who disturb social order.

At the same time, the dataset reveals an alternative discursive strand: some shopkeepers actively attempt to downplay the extent of the disruption, hoping to reassure customers and prevent them from shopping in neighbouring villages (Nieuwsbode, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 1). Their strategy appears to be economically motivated, aimed at preserving a sense of local safety and encouraging continued business in the area. This group adopts a rhetoric that contrasts with dominant frames, emphasizing normalcy and manageability rather than threat (Nieuwsbode, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 1). They are pleased with the additional customers from the AZC who shop at their stores (KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1).

Importantly, shopkeepers are frequently quoted in the articles, which amplifies their voices in the public discourse. Their statements are rarely questioned or critically examined, lending discursive legitimacy to their concerns. I believe that the fact that so-called ordinary, hardworking citizens express feelings of being threatened enhances the social legitimacy of the frame. This dynamic plays an active role in shaping public perceptions and responses to the refugee population in Ter Apel, particularly within the commercial sphere.

Citizens' patrol group

In response to this insecurity discourse, the citizens' patrol (*burgerwacht*) emerges as a recurring element. The formation of a local patrol group in Ter Apel is often presented as a necessary response to the perceived failure of police and governmental institutions (Bolhuis,

2023, as cited in dataset, figure 4). As a result, the citizens' patrol gains a seemingly legitimate position as guardian of public order (Sporrel, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 5), even though it operates outside official structures (Sporrel, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 3; De Nieuws BV, 2023, as cited in transcript folder, source 5). Several members are, in fact, subject to legal proceedings due to the unlawful use of violence against people applying for asylum (Sporrel, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 3).

Furthermore, I argue that the citizens' patrol performs a form of symbolic boundary maintenance. Since they are visibly present in public space, their surveillance serves not only to increase the feeling of safety, but also to enforce informal definitions of belonging. Migrants are often implicitly, or at times explicitly, portrayed as outsiders, as potential disruptors of the established order. I claim that the patrol contributes actively to this dynamic by disproportionately monitoring individuals who do not fit the image of the typical local Groninger in their everyday activities.

In addition, I aim to demonstrate that the citizens' patrol also occupies a position of power within the discourse itself. They are frequently granted space in the media to express their concerns, which are rarely problematized or critically assessed. In doing so, the media help reproduce their worldview as both natural and necessary. Moreover, the patrol frequently appeals to shared societal values such as safety and security, which resonate with a broad audience. This rhetorical strategy enables them to garner public support and evade consequences for unlawful behaviour, as their actions are framed as protective measures taken in the interest of the local population.

The combination of framing migrants as threats and the activation of the citizens' patrol contributes to the reproduction of a binary us-versus-them logic. "*We*" are the native, working, concerned citizens trying to defend our community; "*they*" are the people applying for asylum depicted as sources of nuisance, crime, and social disruption. This division is ideologically charged: it legitimizes exclusion, reinforces polarization, and normalizes the belief that safety depends primarily on the control of the Other.

The fight at the local fair

The analysis revealed that the notion of migrants as a threat is not new. This was already evident in 1996, when the departure centre in Ter Apel first opened. This became evident in a Radio 1

(1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 14) evening news segment, where the presenter talked with locals about a conflict that happened at the local fair. Here, a local resident stated that people applying for asylum “*should be shot (Radio 1 Avondjournaal, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 14)*”, as her daughter had allegedly been harassed by an individual applying for asylum in Ter Apel. Other residents also expressed anger over the disturbances and directed blame toward the municipality. One resident remarked, “*The municipality promised this would be a closed facility. Apparently, they did not keep their word, allowing these people to walk freely through Ter Apel, to shop (Radio 1 Avondjournaal, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 14).*”

From the moment the centre was established, people who apply for asylum have thus been framed as a threat. It could be argued that this perception is, at least in part, grounded in specific experiences, as there are residents who claim to have been personally harassed. At the same time, Ter Apel has not always been a welcoming or supportive environment for people who apply for asylum, in part due to prevailing stigmas surrounding other cultures. This was reflected in a public conflict that arose at the local fair, which led to significant unrest and mutual accusations.

In an episode of KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren (1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1), a local fairground fight was discussed. A recognized refugee reported having been threatened with beer bottles, but noted that the threats ceased once it became clear he did not reside at the nearby deportation centre (KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1). This incident gave the impression that the conflict was a targeted attack by local youths from Ter Apel against people who applied for asylum. The fragment also includes testimony from Pastor Margriet Brugnera, who explained that she had spoken with parish members who witnessed the incident and confirmed this interpretation (KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1).

However, Mayor Herman Euverink stated in the same segment that he had not observed any tensions between the residents of Ter Apel and people who applied for asylum housed at the deportation centre (KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1). According to him, interactions between both groups were generally smooth and friendly. He did acknowledge that the public space had changed since the arrival of people who applied for asylum and that communication was at times difficult due to language barriers (KRO's Dingen

Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1). Nevertheless, he emphasized that these differences were not, in his view, a source of conflict or violence. The mayor explicitly framed the altercation at the fair as an isolated incident.

Additionally, the broadcast featured the chair of the Vlagtwedde Business Association, representing the municipality to which Ter Apel belongs. He claimed that shopkeepers had increasingly felt threatened since the opening of the deportation centre and reported a rise in shoplifting cases (KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1). When asked why people felt more threatened, he responded:

"When a regular customer walks into a store, there's immediate recognition. But when a group of strangers enters, I can understand that, especially in shops where only women are working, people might feel somewhat threatened (KRO's Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1)."

According to him, the perceived sense of threat thus stemmed primarily from unfamiliarity.

This fragment clearly illustrates the framing of people applying for asylum as sources of nuisance or disruption. While the mayor downplayed the incident, likely a politically and economically motivated stance, he also stood to benefit significantly from the continued presence of the deportation centre. After two major employers had previously left Ter Apel, the centre provided a much-needed source of employment in the region (Ter Apeler Courant, 1995, as cited in dataset, figure 21). It is therefore in the mayor's interest to maintain a narrative of harmony and stability to ensure the centre's continued operation and, by extension, regional economic security. Conversely, the chair of the business association had a vested interest in emphasizing the disruptive impact of the centre, particularly in its early stages. Drawing attention to increasing shoplifting and feelings of unsafety among shopkeepers could prompt greater police presence and preventive measures, ultimately aiming to restore consumer confidence. This position also makes strategic sense within a competitive regional context, as neighbouring towns may host competing retailers.

The examples discussed here represent only a small selection of the many cases available. It is important to note that newspaper articles focusing on migrant-related nuisance appear substantially more frequently than those portraying people applying for asylum in a positive light. I argue that this disproportionate coverage reinforces the dominant frame in which people

applying for asylum are associated with insecurity, as it constitutes the main narrative available to the public.

Moreover, the perspectives most prominently featured are those of local residents, shopkeepers, and municipal politicians in Ter Apel, while the voices of people who applied for asylum themselves are largely absent. This imbalance not only contributes to the framing of people applying for asylum as a source of disturbance, but also amplifies a binary us-versus-them narrative, furthering societal polarization and reinforcing exclusionary dynamics.

The role of pictures in framing migrants as threats

I will now briefly address the role that photographs can play in the framing process. As outlined in the methods chapter, I analyse the photographs using Cassidy's (1996) iconographic approach. Although I will discuss two photographs from the dataset in detail, it is important to note that the arguments presented below apply to the broader process of how people that are seeking asylum are visually represented. While I focus on the two images I find most representative of the situation, this analysis aims to provide as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the role of photographs in the context of people who applied for asylum in Ter Apel.



(NOS Nieuws, 2025b, as cited in dataset, figure 22)

The underlying frame of this photograph suggests that people with darker skin tones and dark hair, wearing sportswear and carrying backpacks while walking through the rural landscape of Groningen, are automatically assumed to be people who applied for asylum. In the image, you see a group of individuals walking along a bike path. Many have dark hair, and some are wearing hooded jackets. They carry backpacks or bags in their hands. This photograph accompanies a NOS news article about a decrease in asylum applications. However, there is no clear indication that the individuals depicted are in fact people who applied for asylum, they could just as easily be status holders or Dutch citizens out for a walk. The image operates on an assumption: anyone who does not fit the profile of a white, local farmer is immediately categorized as an individual seeking asylum.

A second element that immediately stands out, is the thick red line crossing out the sign reading 'Ter Apel'. In Dutch traffic signage, this indicates that one is leaving a town; however, it simultaneously conveys an unwelcoming impression. Symbolically, it evokes the sentiment of 'not in Ter Apel.'

In addition, you see a group of people walking, photographed from behind. This perspective hides their faces, expressions, and emotions. I argue that such a portrayal is dehumanizing and reinforces a sense of distance between 'us' and 'them.' By obscuring whether someone is angry, sad, happy, or tired, the image limits our ability to empathize with the individuals depicted. Furthermore, the presence of hooded clothing contributes to a heightened sense of threat. Faces are more difficult to discern, reinforcing a perception of anonymity and unfamiliarity. In this context, local residents' concerns about feeling unsafe walking alone at night (NOVA, 1999, as cited in transcript folder, source 13) become more understandable, given how the visual representation of people applying for asylum, with hoods and obscured faces, suggests a figure associated with unrest or danger.



(NOS Nieuws, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 23)

This photograph originates from a 2022 NOS article (as cited in dataset, figure 23), published during the summer when people were sleeping outside the registration centre in Ter Apel. A striking feature of the image is that it depicts only men, which reinforces the impression that only men are seeking asylum in the Netherlands. However, as Respondent 4 (personal communication, May 2024) pointed out, what the image does not show is that women and children had already been allowed inside, where they were provided with sleeping accommodations. As such, the photograph does not contribute to a balanced portrayal of the individuals seeking asylum arriving in Ter Apel. Instead, it facilitates a narrative that associates the idea of people applying for asylum with men and, by extension, with public nuisance.

4.6.3. Migrants as an economic burden

The framing of migrants as an economic burden on the welfare state, as described in the literature, centres on the notion that migrants make use of social provisions without contributing in return (Ter Horst, 2024). This narrative is particularly evident in national media discourse surrounding Dutch housing policy. Status holders are frequently associated with the housing shortage, as they are perceived to receive priority access to social housing over ‘ordinary’ Dutch citizens (Metro, 2025). This argument is primarily reinforced by the Party for Freedom (PVV), which claims that

the open-border policy pursued by the Netherlands leads to excessive population growth and an influx of migrants, all of whom require housing (PVV, 2023). As a result, the PVV argues, there would be little left for the 'ordinary' Dutch citizen.

The data I have collected largely presents an alternative perspective than the housing crisis on the framing of people applying for asylum as an economic burden. As mentioned in the previous paragraph and reiterated here for clarity due to its relevance to both frames, individuals applying for asylum are frequently associated with shoplifting and burglary. This causes considerable nuisance for the residents of Ter Apel, who consequently feel compelled to invest in surveillance and security measures (Looden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 7). These are the types of economic costs upon which the framing of migrants as an economic burden is based.

Additionally, the data reveals incidents of home burglaries experienced by residents, which entail considerable economic damage. One such example is presented in Figure 6 (Looden, 2023, as cited in dataset), where a woman recounts a break-in at her home, resulting in the need to replace a window. Cash and a laptop were stolen. It is also noted that the security cameras purchased by residents offer little deterrence, as the people who applied for asylum and are allegedly involved in the burglaries appear undeterred by their presence (Looden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 6).

To compensate for these economic damages, the local government, in collaboration with the national State Secretary, introduced a compensation fund for the residents of Ter Apel (Looden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 7). The fund, to be established by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), the Ministry of Justice and Security, and the Municipality of Westerwolde, is intended to reimburse residents who incur costs as a result of nuisance caused by individuals who applied for asylum (Looden, 2023, as cited in dataset, figure 8).

While this is a well-intentioned initiative, and I acknowledge the importance of adequately addressing damage caused by public nuisance, the way this measure is reported does not contribute to a more balanced portrayal of migrants. Once again, the narrative suggests that migrants are a source of disruption, and that the 'ordinary' Dutch citizen is the victim. I argue that there is a clear power struggle at play here where the local citizens have control over the

narrative as compared to the migrants. There is no mention of disturbances caused by residents of Ter Apel themselves, however not all incidents of burglary or shoplifting can be automatically attributed to people who applied for asylum residing in the reception centre. Moreover, the coverage omits any discussion of the harassment or forms of nuisance experienced by people who applied for asylum at the hands of local residents. However, I would state that stigmatization, exclusion, and racist expressions directed at people who applied for asylum also constitute forms of nuisance. Additionally, the fact that these individuals are prohibited from working until they receive official status and a citizen service number (BSN) (COA, n.d.-b) contributes to their economic marginalization and hinders their ability to contribute to society, despite their willingness to do so. Thus, the idea that Dutch citizens are entitled to financial compensation for nuisance caused by people applying for asylum presents a one-sided view that reinforces 'us versus them' thinking and perpetuates the frame of migrants as an economic burden.

4.6.4 Migrants as victims

The frame portraying migrants as victims of war and violence, individuals caught in situations beyond their control and therefore deserving of support, is, like the threat frame, deeply rooted and longstanding. I spoke with a respondent who was active in the early phase of the departure centre in 1997 and who worked in the village to improve the living conditions of refugees in Ter Apel. The respondent told me about a conversation with an individual who applied for asylum that was brought to Ter Apel to work on their return to their home country. According to the individual, the conditions in the camp were terrible.

“There’s no doctor here, no social worker, and those stories were all just so really touching. That we said, yeah, that’s just not okay. And then we, well, we talked to journalists about it and said, there really has to be humane reception here. There really has to be, um, at least a doctor (Respondent 5, personal communication, March 2025).”

Respondent 5 stated that, in her view, providing assistance to the most vulnerable is a core responsibility of her profession, and she considered it self-evident that this should also apply to refugees. After all, they were in need and required support, victims of war and violence seeking a safe place. According to Respondent 5, it was society’s duty to contribute to that effort.

This kind of charitable response is also reflected in the data from news reports. One frequently mentioned example is the outdoor sleeping crisis of 2022, during which the COA lacked sufficient shelter capacity for the number of arriving refugees (Borst, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 10). Humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross and MiGreat stepped in to provide refugees with tents, ponchos, and plastic bags to help them stay at least somewhat dry (Borst, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 10; Looden, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 11; Sporrel, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 12). The media repeatedly emphasized that such a situation, where people who want to apply for asylum are forced to sleep in tents, is unacceptable in a developed country like the Netherlands (Borst, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 9). Particular attention was given to the safety and well-being of these people. Sleeping outside in the rain poses serious health risks, and diseases spread rapidly when people sleep in cramped tents without access to proper sanitation or facilities to maintain hygiene (Sporrel, 2022, as cited in dataset, figure 12; Dagblad van het Noorden, 2024, as cited in dataset, figure 13).

While the victim frame of migrants is rooted in empathy and appeals to people's sense of moral responsibility to help those in need, I would also argue that this portrayal creates certain problems. First, it is striking that this way of representing migrants often overlooks their own capacities. The emphasis is typically placed on their suffering and the fact that they are in situations beyond their control (Greenwood & Thomson, 2019). However, I would argue that this portrayal undermines their personal agency and their ability to actively influence their circumstances, positioning them primarily as dependent and in need of help.

Second, and as a consequence of this constructed dependency, policies may develop that focus more on care than on integration and self-reliance. Migrants are often not allowed to work during their asylum procedure, except under specific conditions set by the national government (COA, n.d.-b). Measures such as these reinforce their reliance on the state and prevent them from contributing, which in turn hinders both integration and independence.

Third, this frame complicates the possibility of engaging in an honest and balanced discussion about migration. When the public discourse centres primarily on the inhumane conditions migrants face, even well-intentioned or necessary policy changes may be prematurely dismissed.

Finally, I argue that this frame once again reinforces an “us versus them” logic. It legitimizes the division of migrants into categories of “deserving” and “undeserving.” Only those migrants who visibly suffer or appear innocent are seen as worthy of solidarity, whereas others, such as those from countries not experiencing war or persecution, are often labelled as “safe country nationals,” implying their claims are less legitimate.

4.6.5 Migrants as ordinary individuals

I found little evidence in the data of the sentiment that people who are applying for asylum are simply human beings like you and me, with educational backgrounds and the potential to contribute to society. The absence of this perspective as a discernible pattern is telling in itself: more extreme framings, depicting migrants as victims, threats, or economic burdens, appear to receive significantly more attention in the media. The sentiment that most closely aligned with this more neutral or humanizing view was a certain sense of indifference expressed by some individuals toward the presence of migrants. For instance, in a KRO’s *Dingen Die Gebeuren* (1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1) evening news broadcast, a resident stated that they “personally have nothing against” people who applied for asylum shopping in the city centre. Whether they are present or not does not seem to matter much to this individual.

I did, however, find a possible explanation in the data for the limited presence and reproduction of this frame: integration. There is frequent discussion about the perceived divide between migrants and the local population, and the difficulty of fostering interaction between these groups. To quote the previous mayor of Ter Apel, Herman Euverink:

“It has become clear to me that the residents of Ter Apel, precisely because these asylum seekers also do their shopping in Ter Apel and appear in the streetscape, that there is some concern among certain groups: will all of this turn out alright? This is partly driven by the fact that these people speak a foreign language. And it is very difficult to communicate. Then you see them standing together in small groups in or in front of shops. For some people, that brings a feeling of insecurity (KRO’s Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1).”

Language barriers are thus seen as a contributing factor, as well as the tendency of migrants to form close-knit communities, something that is sometimes perceived as threatening by the local population. This dynamic may hinder the integration process, as it results in limited contact

between the two groups and therefore leaves little room for mutual understanding. This makes it more difficult to perceive an individual who has applied for asylum as an equal individual capable of contributing to society, especially when feelings of threat and a lack of communication dominate the discourse.

The local pastor commented on this as well, which again contributes to the lack of communication and reinforces the sense of threat, whether justified or not.

“Yes, it is mainly the streetscape that has changed since the summer holidays. When we came back from vacation, we were shocked as well, because suddenly a thousand people had arrived. And yes, then the streetscape changes. The main street suddenly becomes a coming and going of people, mostly of strange people (KRO’s Dingen Die Gebeuren, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 1).”

This was also evident earlier in a NOS news report, which showed that the way the Dutch asylum system is structured plays a role in this. People have to wait a long time for the outcome of their procedure, which leads them to describe the situation as hopeless (NOS Journaal, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 2).

“It is connected to the uncertainty people are in, for example, the interviews are delayed, deportations are delayed, and as a result, the group of people who have no prospects and nothing left to lose is growing. And that creates tensions within the centre, and that radiates to the surroundings and affects the support in the village. [...] In the centre there are threats, internal conflicts, and they have threatened staff members (NOS Journaal, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 2).”

An episode of *EenVandaag* from 2022 (EenVandaag, 2022, as cited in transcript folder, source 4) also confirmed these issues, demonstrating that we are still dealing with the same type of challenges in the present day.

There is a significant exception in the media coverage of individuals who seek asylum within this frame, one that cannot be specifically attributed to Ter Apel but rather applies to the Netherlands as a whole: the reception of people who resemble us. I find it important to first highlight this point, as it underscores that most migrants are not viewed in a ‘normal’ way, as ordinary people who may contribute to society. This perception differs in the case of

Ukrainians, and previously Yugoslavs, which is why I will now turn to that topic. A telling quote by Hedy D'Ancona, former State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment, speaks volumes:

"Suddenly, Yugoslavs started arriving. Parallel to the Ukrainians now, suddenly there were no objections at all. [Wim] Kok said that we had to be at a station very early on a Monday morning to warmly welcome the Yugoslavs. When I asked if there was a limit to the number of people, he said, "No, there is no limit." So I observed that a distinction was being made between people (NTR, Andere Tijden, 2022, as cited in transcript folder, source 3)."

Media coverage from the time when Ukrainians arrived in the Netherlands also clearly illustrates the difference in willingness to provide shelter. For instance, there is no evidence of disturbances in villages where asylum centres for Ukrainian refugees were established, whereas such incidents did occur at centres hosting refugees of other nationalities, as happened in Kollum and Berlicum, examples I previously elaborated on. Moreover, much attention was given to initiatives by the Dutch population to assist Ukrainian refugees, with a sense of pride expressed in the generosity of the helping Dutch citizens. Even though there were far more Ukrainian people seeking refuge in the EU after the Russian invasion than there were Syrians seeking refuge in the EU in 2015 (Bueno Lacy & Van Houtum, 2023), the hospitable ways in which Ukrainian people have been welcomed in the Netherlands is strikingly different from the discrimination, criminalization and negativity "non-western" (Van Boxtel, 2023) people seeking asylum in the Netherlands had to face. Additionally, at the policy level, several measures have been arranged differently for Ukrainian refugees, which simplify their integration process and reduce the distance between them and the local population (Hoorntje, 2024; Willemsen, 2025). For example, €184 million was raised through Giro 555 for the reception of Ukrainian refugees (Willemsen, 2025), Ukrainians are permitted to work immediately upon arrival in the Netherlands, and social services are made directly available to them (NOS Nieuws, 2025). It is even argued that the Netherlands is still doing too little to provide mental health support for Ukrainians (Hoorntje, 2024).

All of this indicates that there is a selective process in determining who is perceived as "one of us" and who is not. This reinforces us-versus-them thinking, as Ukrainian refugees are more often seen and treated as part of the in-group, while refugees of other nationalities are not afforded that same privilege (Bueno Lacy & Van Houtum, 2023). This type of media coverage

also reinforces existing power structures and social hierarchies within the Dutch societal order. By systematically portraying Ukrainian refugees more positively—framing them as part of “us,” as individuals who can contribute to society and are deserving of our help—while non-Ukrainian refugees are more often depicted as threats, economic burdens, or passive victims, cultural hierarchies are reproduced and maintained. This framing minimizes the potential contributions of non-Ukrainian refugees, as such possibilities are rarely emphasized.

In addition, I argue that these hierarchies further contribute to a symbolic distinction between “good” and “bad” refugees, as Bueno Lacy and Van Houtum (2023) demonstrated in their analysis of the differences regarding the reception of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees in the EU. This mode of thinking implies that some lives are more valuable than others, simply because we are more able to identify with the physical appearance and cultural practices of one group over another. According to the data, this distinction is also present in the asylum migration systems of the Netherlands.

4.6.6 Interpretation of findings

As reflected in the findings, people who apply for asylum are framed in various ways across multiple domains, with some frames being more visible and frequent than others. These frames all contribute to a binary us-versus-them mentality and serve to legitimize the exclusion of individuals applying for asylum from our society. This makes integration difficult, as these individuals are not seen as worthy members of society but rather as threats, burdens on the welfare state, or victims in need of assistance. Moreover, these frames legitimize the maintenance of power structures that reinforce cultural hierarchies within Dutch society, wherein “non-Western” refugees occupy a lower status compared to Western refugees (Van Boxtel, 2023). Consequently, Western refugees are afforded greater opportunities for successful integration. Overall, these frames do not contribute to a more inclusive society, nor to successful integration or the development of a state in which everyone can contribute. Through the use of these frames, the Dutch ultimately undermine their own interests.

4.7 Bordering

4.7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how Ter Apel functions as a border in physical, administrative, and symbolic terms. I draw on the work of Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020a), as outlined in

the theoretical framework. They identify three types of borders that migrants must cross before they can truly participate in society: the paper border, the iron border, and the camp as a border. This chapter is structured according to this tripartite conceptual framework.

For this chapter, I again employed a combination of analytical methods. Critical Discourse Analysis, based on Neumann's (2008) model, was used to analyse all material from the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision as well as newspaper articles. In addition, the interview data were analysed using the model developed by Plochg and Van Zwieten (2007), as outlined in the methods chapter.

4.7.2 The paper border

Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020a) describe the paper border as the border associated with the passport required to cross a border. In the case of migrants, however, they frequently lack a passport, and the paper-based process in the Netherlands begins at the registration centre in Ter Apel. In this paragraph, I will address the paper border from this perspective.

The data revealed that individuals who apply for asylum are dependent on a slow, impersonal bureaucratic system. Waiting times are often long, there is a lack of clarity regarding procedures, and the process is described as hopeless. Immigration lawyers also encounter challenges with the slow application system.

"If you sometimes call the Ministry of Justice to ask whether Mr. X can finally have his file retrieved to finally get his hearing, you get the answer, "Oh ma'am, we have thousands of files here and yes, we simply cannot get to that." They also cannot tell me at all in what way a particular file will be dealt with (NOS, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 2)."

In an episode of Vesuvius (1997), an employee of the IND responsible for hearings and decisions described this bureaucratic process people who apply for asylum face in the Netherlands as follows:

"I would find it very threatening. I have imagined it myself. It must be very uncertain for an asylum seeker (Vesuvius, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 7)."

Recently, there has been extensive reporting on the long waiting times at the IND, which further delayed the asylum process. As a result, people remain in asylum reception centres for extended

periods while awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications, leading to limited throughput (EenVandaag, 2022, as cited in transcript folder, source 4). This has caused chaotic scenes, with people who applied or still need to apply for asylum sleeping outside the gates of the registration centre in Ter Apel (EenVandaag, 2022, as cited in transcript folder, source 4).

As previously noted, there is a significant difference in the position of Ukrainians, who gain faster access to social services, whereas others must navigate a more cumbersome and distant system.

The paper border, which in the case of Ter Apel refers to the registration and admission process, creates a distinction between permitted and unwanted mobility. Individuals possessing a passport or visa are allowed to cross the border and do not have to undergo a lengthy process to determine whether they are welcome. Those who cannot apply for a visa due to the legislation of the European Union or who do not possess a passport are left with no choice but to enter the European Union and the Netherlands via dangerous routes. This is then classified as unwanted mobility. In doing so, people are divided into different groups based on the location of their birthplace. The bureaucratic processes within the Dutch registration system for migrants thus function as instruments of exclusion, classified according to nationality.

4.7.3 The iron border

The iron border is described by Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020a) as the physical fences and surveillance surrounding a country or area that migrants must cross before they can enter their destination country. In a national context, this translates to border controls and security at Schiphol Airport and the Port of Rotterdam. Since there are no physical fences surrounding the Netherlands, it is interesting to examine this concept in the context of Ter Apel. Here, it manifests in the form of fences, camera surveillance, and police presence.

“So they put fences between those courtyards and kind of, uh, in an attempt to keep people apart. And there are now all those mobile cameras, like the ones you often see at construction sites, you know? [...] So it now looks a lot like a prison, even though it isn’t. People are allowed to leave. Uh. But certainly, it is difficult not to get that feeling when you have so many fences around you (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025).”

In the previous section, I demonstrated how the framing of people applying for asylum as a threat is frequently present in media coverage. This framing legitimizes the implementation of

measures aimed at preventing this so-called threat and protecting “us” from “them.” During an interview on the issues within the asylum system, former State Secretary Job Cohen was directly asked how high the fence around Europe should be, to which he replied that there is no other option than to stop these individuals from coming to the Netherlands. *"There is no other way, for the simple reason that it [...] is detrimental to the development of our country (Netwerk, 1999, as cited in transcript folder, source 8)."*

Fences are erected (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 2025), numerous surveillance cameras are placed around the registration centre and throughout the village (EenVandaag, 2023, as cited in transcript folder, source 6), and security personnel are deployed on the local bus route in response to repeated reports of disturbances and danger (figure 14; figure 15; figure 16). These types of measures are primarily designed to provide the in-group with a sense of protection, while simultaneously intimidating the out-group and discouraging them from crossing the border, concepts well-documented in the literature (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). The focus here lies particularly on the perception of safety, which tends to increase as more visible security measures are introduced to ensure it. A striking example of such a measure is the proposed Personal Behavioural Approach (PBA), in which Minister Faber planned to require so-called “troublesome” people who applied for asylum to report twice daily (NOS Nieuws, 2025). The rationale behind this measure was that having to report frequently would reduce the time available for causing public disturbances. In practice, it would function as a physical barrier, limiting the ability to enter the village and create chaos.

Politically, such actions serve as a signal of being tough on people who seek asylum and are framed as efforts to enhance residents’ safety by reducing the threat posed by the out-group. Therefore, these measures are largely electoral in nature—deployed in the hope of garnering public support by demonstrating a strong stance in defence of national and local security.

4.7.4 The camp border

The final form of bordering discussed by Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020a) is the camp as border. This refers to the social separation that migrants in the camp experience in relation to the outside world (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). This form of border determines the rights of individuals inside versus outside the camp and communicates who is deemed eligible to belong to society by placing migrants in remote and tightly controlled locations, separate from the broader public (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). These camps reinforce the

exclusion of migrants from mainstream society and severely limit their opportunities for participation (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020a). The reception centre in Ter Apel is portrayed in various ways as a place located outside of society.

Firstly, this is due to its physical location, which is difficult to access. The issue is situated far from the centre of political decision-making (EenVandaag, 2023, as cited in transcript folder, source 6), making it literally invisible and thus not perceived as an urgent problem. It is, after all, out of sight.

Secondly, Ter Apel is constructed as a space outside society due to the extreme levels of chaos associated with it (2Vandaag, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 10). It has been described as evoking “memories of the situation before the Second World War” (NOVA, 1997, as cited in transcript folder, source 9). The connection drawn in this segment by the presenter to the Westerbork transit camp speaks volumes. Ter Apel is thus framed as a space distant—both physically and symbolically—from Dutch society.

Finally, the conditions within the camp—such as overcrowded facilities (2Vandaag, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 10), long waiting times (NOS, 1994, as cited in transcript folder, source 2), lack of information, and heavy surveillance and control (Argos, 2012, as cited in transcript folder, source 11), serve as a symbolic form of exclusion. As a result, the reception centre in Ter Apel is not merely a temporary shelter, but a place where migrants are structurally kept outside of society. Their legal status remains uncertain, access to social services is delayed, and during this time, they are physically and socially removed from the rest of society, placed in a remote village in Groningen.

In this way, the camp as a border functions to uphold and reproduce existing power structures between migrants and the local population. It reinforces a renewed distinction between “us” and “them.” This illustrates how bordering processes extend beyond geographical lines on a map—they are deeply embedded in the socio-political structures of the Netherlands. In this context, Ter Apel is not merely a reception centre for migrants, but a site of exclusion through which the Dutch state attempts to keep out those who are deemed undesirable.

4.7.5 Interpretation of findings

The findings clearly demonstrate that the three forms of bordering identified by Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020a), which form the basis of my theoretical framework, are present in Ter

Apel. All three borders function as mechanisms to keep out groups of people who are labelled as undesirable and to reinforce a division between “us” and “them.” These borders operate not only as physical barriers, but also as symbolic tools of exclusion.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

Negative media and political attention surrounding individuals seeking asylum in the Netherlands has become almost inextricable from the current media and political landscape. Since the 2023 elections, this topic has become increasingly polarized (Albada et al., 2021), with the public debate being co-opted to such an extent that discussions on migration are now almost exclusively framed in binary terms: are you pro or con? It has already been established that media coverage influences our perception of the world (Slothuus, 2010; Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). However, the specific dynamics of this influence within the context of the asylum registration centre in Ter Apel have not previously been examined. By conducting expert and stakeholder interviews, as well as performing a data analysis of media and news coverage, I investigated how the framing of asylum seekers in both media and political discourse has been constructed, how populist narratives capitalize on this framing, and what the implications are for the development of the Ter Apel registration centre. These insights serve to address my central research question: *How is the framing of asylum seekers in relation to Ter Apel used to justify and shape asylum migration policy in the Netherlands, and what are its implications for the development of the centre?* In this chapter, I will answer this question based on the findings presented in Chapter 4.

The framing of individuals seeking asylum has become often strongly negative in political discourse (Brouwer et al., 2017; Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007). Asylum seekers are in the media and political discourse frequently associated with nuisance, violence, threat, and theft (De Boer, 2025; RTV Noord, 2025). In the scholarly debate within the literature regarding whether the media plays an active or passive role in the framing process (Cohen, 1994; Robinson, 2001), my findings indicate that, in the case of framing asylum seekers and the situation in Ter Apel, the media plays an extraordinarily active role. Media coverage is predominantly driven by sensationalism. News becomes marketable primarily when it reports on events that deviate from the norm; otherwise, such events are deemed unnewsworthy. Consequently, when an incident involving an asylum seeker occurs and receives media attention, typically casting the individual in a negative light, and there is an absence of positive

counter-narratives, the impression quickly arises that all asylum seekers are inherently associated with such incidents. This perception is reinforced by the fact that these are often the only stories reaching the public, leaving no alternative frame of reference. The media has little incentive to report positive stories about asylum seekers, as such narratives do not generate the same level of public interest. Sensationalism, fear, and moral panic are the factors that drive news consumption.

I also found significant parallels in my findings with the scholarly literature regarding the effects of negative framing, particularly in reinforcing the notion of “us versus them,” which creates clear distinctions between different groups of people (Moffitt, 2022; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). In my data, this emerged both on a micro level, where incidents occurred against individuals seeking asylum purely based on their migrant status, and on a meta level, where Dutch border and asylum policies are constructed around the “us versus them” narrative, with regulations further entrenching this way of thinking.

The debate in the scholarly literature concerning populism indicates that populist actors are primarily engaged in constructing “the people” as an identity defined in opposition to “the elite” (Taranu, 2015). Populists are thus continuously involved in creating scapegoats (Taranu, 2015), in this case, either individuals seeking asylum or the government, which is portrayed as having allowed too many asylum seekers into the country. They position themselves as the saviors of the people who will ensure that the people regain control over their nation (Moffitt, 2022). My data revealed that this primarily results in populist leaders focusing less on solving concrete problems and more on constructing narratives around these issues, with the aim of securing electoral support in future elections. They achieve this by continuously employing language that evokes a sense of threat, for example by claiming that the Netherlands is “full” or that the country is being “flooded” with asylum seekers. Moreover, they engage in symbolic politics to convey an impression of taking action, which in practice has little to no real impact. By repeatedly stating that asylum reception conditions will be made more austere, Dutch populist politicians create the perception among voters that concrete measures are being implemented. However, in reality, the reception facilities can hardly be made any more austere, as they often consist of nothing more than a bed and a locker in a room.

What I can conclude from this, is that the strategy of this coalition and their strict asylum policy are dependent on a very important factor; crisis. This idea of a migration crisis must feel real

in order for their policy to feel necessary. The current portrayal of the situation in Ter Apel is strategically employed to evoke a sense of crisis among the population, or in the words of the current Prime Minister, a “*perceived crisis*” (Oost, 2024). Citizens must feel that an urgent problem exists; otherwise, they are less likely to vote for the party claiming to resolve it. Therefore, the current far right Dutch government is reliant on perpetuating the crisis instead of resolving it.

In the academic debate on the various frames commonly used to discuss people seeking asylum (Amores & Arcila, 2019; Brouwer et al., 2017; Greenwood & Thomson, 2019; Horsti, 2013; Horsti, 2016; Roggeband & Vliegthart, 2007; Ter Horst, 2024; Verleyen & Beckers, 2023), I positioned myself by identifying four overarching themes that emerged consistently across different studies: the threat frame, the victim frame, the frame depicting migrants as an economic burden, and the frame portraying migrants as equal individuals who can contribute positively to society. All four of these frames were clearly reflected in my data. However, I contend that an important aspect is missing from this categorization—an element I frequently observed in my data—namely, a frame that focuses on cultural differences and the inevitable clashes between cultures. This frame was particularly evident in the narratives of populist parties, which depicted non-Western cultures as inherently different and dangerous (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma 2022, 2022).

In revisiting the points introduced at the outset of this thesis, I reaffirm the ways in which this research contributes to society as well as to the existing body of academic knowledge. This thesis contributes to the academic understanding of the complex interplay between media framing, political discourse, and policy legitimation within the context of asylum migration, using the case of Ter Apel in the Netherlands as a focal point. My study addresses the gap of media and political discourse in asylum migration cases, by exploring the mutual influence and complementary dynamics between media narratives and political discourse, illustrating how they jointly shape both public perception and policy decisions regarding asylum migration.

By anchoring the analysis in the specific case of Ter Apel, this research not only broadens theoretical discussions but also offers a localized perspective on how media framing and political discourse interact in real-world policy contexts. This case study provides insight into the mechanisms through which localized incidents and their media portrayals can escalate into

broader national debates, subsequently influencing policy formation and legitimization processes.

Furthermore, this thesis enriches the scholarly discourse on border studies and asylum migration by conceptualizing Ter Apel as a constructed border space, revealing how such sites are central to both border control and the symbolic framing of migration. In doing so, it highlights how the three types of borders identified by Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy (2020a) continuously discriminate and exclude people seeking asylum from society.

This thesis holds significant societal relevance by critically examining how frames shape the discourse and policies surrounding asylum reception in the Netherlands, with a particular focus on the situation in Ter Apel. The study addresses the urgent need to understand how negative framing can fuel societal polarization, dividing public opinion into pro- and anti-migration camps, and making constructive solutions more difficult to achieve. By scrutinizing whether the narratives around Ter Apel contribute to this division, the research opens possibilities for fostering a more balanced public debate and easing social tensions.

Moreover, this thesis sheds light on the power dynamics between media, political actors, and the public in shaping asylum migration policy. By questioning the roles and responsibilities of influential actors in amplifying certain narratives, it calls for greater transparency and accountability in how public opinion and policy decisions are formed.

Furthermore, this thesis highlights how symbolic politics and populist narratives simplify complex migration issues into emotionally charged symbols and visuals, shaping public perception and voter behavior, especially in the context of upcoming elections where migration is likely to be a central theme. By revealing how crisis framing and populist rhetoric can legitimize restrictive policies, this study underscores the risk of migration debates becoming dominated by fear and oversimplification. It advocates for a more informed and nuanced public discourse, urging policymakers, media professionals, and civil society to critically examine the narratives they promote. Ultimately, this research calls for a migration debate grounded in facts and complexity rather than populist tactics, contributing to a healthier democratic dialogue as electoral discussions on migration intensify.

Discussion and suggestion for future research

This study did not involve the creation of a systematic overview of all Dutch newspapers and media outlets reporting on asylum seekers or on Ter Apel. Given the vast volume of coverage—something that has been consistent for years—it was not the aim of this research to extrapolate quantitative data from this body of reporting. However, the absence of a systematic approach occasionally made it challenging to justify the inclusion or exclusion of specific sources. While I included all media and news reports deemed relevant to the research question in the database, this selection is by no means exhaustive. As such, this limitation may have affected the validity of the study, particularly in terms of representativeness and reproducibility.

Another area of improvement, as well as a suggestion for future research would be the inclusion of the perspectives of people who have applied for asylum in Ter Apel themselves. While I focused mostly on the representations of these individuals in the media and politics, I did not incorporate the direct voices of those who are the subject of the framing that I discussed: the individuals who are applying or have applied for asylum in Ter Apel. In this study, I have argued for the importance of recognizing asylum seekers as equals—individuals with agency, education, knowledge, and the potential to contribute meaningfully to society. However, the perspectives of asylum seekers themselves were not included among the respondents. Their exclusion limited the depth and human dimension of the findings, particularly in understanding how negative media and political framing is experienced on a personal level. Including asylum seekers in the research would likely have provided a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the effects of such framing. Therefore, I would strongly recommend that future research places these individuals at the centre of inquiry. Doing so would not only enrich the data, but also contribute to a more inclusive and ethically responsible understanding of the problem, one that challenges the dominant narratives by amplifying the voices of those most directly affected.

Another suggestion for future research would be to compare the media and political framing of Ter Apel with that of other asylum reception centres in the Netherlands and/or elsewhere in the EU. Ter Apel is the location through which nearly all individuals seeking asylum must pass, as it serves as the central registration centre. Moreover, all parts of the asylum procedure are concentrated there, making it an exceptional and unique site. It would therefore be interesting and relevant to compare Ter Apel with another asylum reception centre in the Netherlands, or

with a centre in a country that operates under different asylum and migration regulations. Such a comparative analysis could shed light on existing bottlenecks as well as opportunities for improvement within the Dutch asylum system, thereby offering valuable insights for political decision-making and policy development.

A final suggestion for future research would be to examine how the negative framing of individuals seeking asylum contributes to the decrease of democratic values such as inclusion, diversity and equality in Dutch society. My research showed the basics of this, as the negative framing enforces more negative beliefs about a group throughout society, but I feel it is important to see what these beliefs do to the continuation of the Dutch democratic state. Future research could build on this study by investigating how media and political discourse around migration and asylum reception may indirectly legitimize the undermining of democratic values under the guise of ‘security’ or ‘order’, and how this affects the integrity of the Dutch democratic state over time.

Reflection

Looking back, I consider the process of writing this thesis both valuable and educational, an experience that has challenged me deeply on both an academic and personal level. I began this journey with great optimism, knowing early on that I wanted to focus on the topic of migration. I was enthusiastic about this choice, but I quickly discovered that I was thinking on too large a scale, envisioning a research project that could easily take years to complete. My enthusiasm made it difficult to narrow my focus, which turned out to be my first major challenge.

In the winter of 2024, I started looking for an internship with a specific focus on organizations connected to media or journalism. In December, I found my placement at *De Correspondent*, where I had the opportunity to conduct research on Ter Apel and the Dutch migration system under the guidance of Maite Vermeulen. Working with Maite, someone I had long admired, felt incredibly special, and I was grateful for the chance to learn from her during this period.

The following months were immensely instructive. I worked four days a week at *De Correspondent*, mainly transcribing and summarizing interviews that Maite had previously conducted, and compiling a timeline of key events surrounding the Ter Apel registration centre

and the broader Dutch migration system. I also had the opportunity to accompany Maite on interviews, and over the course of the internship, I spent five days in Ter Apel myself.

The remaining days of the week I dedicated to my thesis. This sometimes demanded a great deal of mental focus, as switching from the practical, hands-on work at my internship to the more theoretical and methodological aspects of thesis writing often proved challenging. I occasionally faced self-doubt, questioning my own capabilities and the direction of my research. The thesis began to feel like a monumental task and a major hurdle between me and my degree. Whenever I found myself overwhelmed or lost in my own work, Henk was always there to guide me back. I gained a great deal from our meetings, which consistently left me motivated and inspired to return to my writing. This period taught me much about my perseverance, my confidence in academic spaces, and the importance of discussing my topic with others to clarify it for myself.

Now, I find myself at the final stage of this process. Writing the analysis was particularly rewarding, as it felt like I was truly arriving somewhere. I was finally able to put the arguments and relationships in the data into words, shaping the narrative that had been forming in my mind for months. I genuinely enjoyed this part of the work, and it came to me with relative ease.

All in all, I experienced this process as challenging, enlightening, and deeply inspiring. I look back on a meaningful Master's journey, during which I not only developed my academic skills but also came to know myself better. I am proud of the work that lies before you, and of myself for having written it.

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Appendix 1 - Beeld & Geluid reference list

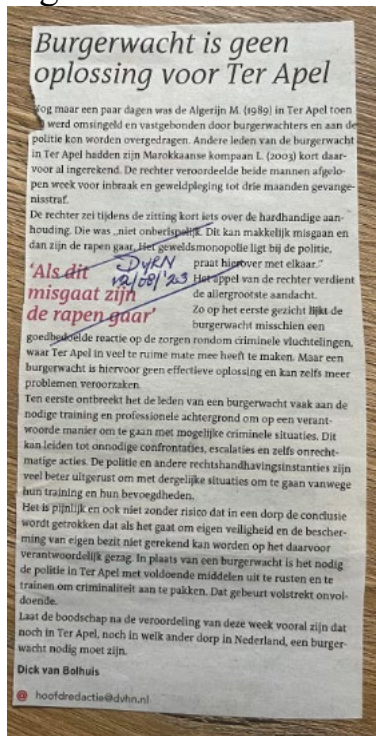
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Figure 3



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Figure 4



Bolhuis, D. (2023, August 12). Burgerwacht is geen oplossing voor Ter Apel. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 4.

Figure 5



Sporrel, L. (2023, August 10). Asielzoekers die burgerwacht ving na diefstallen in Ter Apel de cel in. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 5.

Figure 6



Looden, M (2023, December 14). Inbraken Rütenbrock door bewoners van AZC. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 6.

Figure 7



Looden, M. (2023, December 9). Schadefonds voor inwoners Ter Apel. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 7.

Figure 8



Looden, M. (2023, December 9) Schadefonds voor inwoners Ter Apel nabij. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 8.

Figure 9



Borst, M. (2022, June 15). Een compleet tentenkamp. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 9.

Figure 10



Borst, M. (2022, June 14). Rode Kruis helpt COA met tenten in Ter Apel. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 10.

Figure 11



Looden, M. (2022, August 6). Rode Kruis verlengt verblijf in Ter Apel. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 11.

Figure 12



Sporrel, L. (2022, September 9). Roos deelt poncho's uit aan asielzoekers in Ter Apel. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 12.

Figure 13



Dagblad van het Noorden (2024). Rode Kruis monitort situatie in aanmeldcentrum Ter Apel. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 13.

Figure 14



Nieuwsbode. (2022, January 19). Extra afspraken overlast busvervoer. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 14.

Figure 15



Dagblad van het Noorden. (2022, January 18). 'Gastheren en -vrouwen' maken bus reis veiliger. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 15.

Figure 16



Dagblad van het Noorden. (2017, November 21). Bus stopt dicht bij asielcentrum. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 16.

Figure 17



Dagblad van het Noorden. (2023, December 23). Meer potentiële overlastgevers Ter Apel. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 17.

Figure 18



Dagblad van het Noorden. (2023, November 21). Radeloze winkeliers in Ter Apel sturen brandbrief rond overlast. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 18.

Figure 19



Dagblad van het Noorden. (2023, November 1). 'Als er niks gebeurt, kan er zomaar eens een dode vallen'. [Scanned newspaper article]. Dataset own collection, figure 19.

Figure 20



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Figure 21



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Figure 22



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Figure 23



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